Vividness

Book: 86

Nevaeh

Marcel Ray Duriez

24 Sweetheart

'Sweetheart, you're safe.' Karly says, brushing some of my hair from my face. 'Would it make you more comfortable if I left? Is there someone else you would like to talk to?'

It did not matter who - Melvin could read everyone's mind. If he read their minds, he had never come to see me. Or he would see me like this. But then I would never get my proper goodbye.

I do not respond to Karly, and neither of them has said anything to me for a long time. I could feel my hands trembling as I thought of the probability of me seeing Melvin. It did not seem too high.

'Can you tell us what happened?' Karly asks, her voice so soft I strain to hear.

My thoughts flash back to what happened.

Sunlight streaming into my room. My Hamlet book is on my

desk. His hands were on my body. His knee on my stomach. My head banged against the headboard. Black spots over my vision. A pin-prick pain in my side. Melvin's voice urged me to fight. Me giving up.

'I don't remember.'

The needle pickled in my skin.

My hands drift to my side, touching my stomach. No needle. Not anymore. I was awake now.

Karly's hand touches mine. For the second time, I pulled my hand from hers, remembering how my hands were locked down before. Karly does not hold me or prevent me from pulling away. She was disgusted with me. She did not want me.

Thick tears were pooling in my eyes. It made me angry that my body would betray me like this. Anyone could tell that I was a liar if I started crying. My throat hurt so much that I withheld sobs, but it was

no use. My tears slipped over my eyelashes and down my cheeks too fast for me to discretely wipe them away. I would never see Melvin or Naddalin Natalie again.

I missed them so much - both.

Had Melchor told me anyone else was here? My mind struggled to recall the information. Was it Dejen or Naddalin Natalie, or Dejen and Vivian? I tried to force my mind to remember his words but the more I tried, the fuzzier it got. I

doubted Vivian would ever willingly stay at the hospital for me. She did not like me.

Why would Melchor tell me they were here? Why would they even be here?

Whoever it was, were they waiting with the getaway car? If I ran fast enough, I could make it down to see Naddalin Natalie, if she were here, before they drove away.

'Lily.' Karly sighs, wiping some stray tears from my cheeks. I turned my head away from her,

resisting her touch. This was manipulative affection. She would get me to fall apart and then she would leave me. 'Please, please don't do this.'

Melchor's face remained blank, though Karly's was full of emotion. Fake emotion, but emotion. I sobbed quietly; my face turned away from Karly. I wish she did not see how much it was hurting me.

'What can we do to make this better?' Melchor says to me. He takes a deep, slow breath, closing his

eyes. 'Do you feel more comfortable talking to someone else?'

He was giving me options now. If I could just get Melvin or Naddalin Natalie here and say my goodbye to them before the options were taken from me, that would be good.

'I want Melvin.' I sniff between my cries. My heavy breath was hurting my chest so much.

'Alright.' Karly says, her voice masked with relief and urgency. 'I'll go get him now.' She

pats my hand, stands up and disappears from the room. A sigh of relief escaped me when Karly disappeared. I did not want her to come back.

Melchor watches me with his golden eyes, studying me. I hated it. He reaches for my hand, and though every inch of me wants to pull away, I crave his comforting touch more. He is rubbing little circles on my hand, his dark eyes on my face.

I stared back at him.

I shake my head. I would tell him nothing. 'I want to see Melvin before you leave.' I tell him firmly. But, again, my voice was anything but firm. It was weak, pathetic. begging. He liked it when I begged. A shiver runs over my body.

Melchor stares at me, his eyes narrowing slightly. I could see his features change as he realized the meaning in my words. The muscles in his arms stiffened. 'Lily,' his voice was forced. 'We're not leaving you.'

'You are.' Tears were leaking over my cheeks again. I pull my arms close to my chest. It hurt to do it. My arms hurt and my chest hurt. My chest hurt so much.

'No, Lily, we aren't.' Melchor insists. 'Why do you think that?'

I could not control myself anymore. They won. They tore me apart and now they were going to leave me. What little control I had over my body dissipated as I broke down into hyperventilating sobs. I

could not breathe. My head pounded with every shallow, painful breath I managed to suck in. It felt as if I was not even exhaling, I was just gasping in the air between my fits. My chest hurts.

'I need to see him before you go.' I hiccup pathetically.

'Sweetheart, please, listen to me.' Melchor was talking to me now. The others were gone. They all knew what had happened to me. 'No one is leaving you. We are all here. We love you, Lily.'

I try to pull away from me, but it hurts so damn much. My chest hurts. I wanted to pound my fits into it. I hated my chest for hurting. But moving my arms hurt too, so I just let Melchor hold me. This would be the last time a vampire ever touched me. I would miss it. I liked how cold they were.

Melvin's at my side then, his face so close I flinched away. 'Lily,' he whispers, 'I'm here.'

'I'm sorry.' I close my eyes, feeling my world blur again as I turn away. My jaw hurt.

'How can you apologize?' Melvin breathes, his voice as hue of horror. 'This was not your fault.'

I did not fight enough. I let him do it. I should have fought harder. I welcomed the darkness when it was too quick. I should not have given up.

I feel the pinprick of pain in my stomach again. I pressed my palm against it, making sure no syringe

was injecting me with more of the drug.

The blankets rustle as Melvin sits beside me. I flinch when his hand cups my cheek, my eyes still shut tightly.

'I am the one who needs to apologize - profusely. I swore I would protect you. I swore nothing would hard you again. And, yet again, I have broken my promise.'

His words - his voice - tears in my heart. Hot tears are rolling down my cheeks.

I opened my mouth to argue with him, to tell him it was not his fault. But my mind wheels back. It was not his fault, and yet it was - his and Melchor's and the whole coven's. They had done nothing, and yet this was about them.

This was about them. Not me. It was not about me, until it was.

I shudder, remembering just how much this was about me. How much it would remain about me. How much I would have to deal with.

His thumb runs over my cheekbone, and I am a little surprised by how relieving it felt. My face hurt - all of it. And so did my body, I realized. My whole body felt stiff, and it throbbed with pain.

'That feels good.' I whisper, my throat hoarse with pain. 'Your hand.'

'It's cold.' He murmurs.

I swallow thickly, blinking back tears as I open my eyes. His dark eyes were just inches from my face, wide with worry.

Melvin shifts, and I flinch back before I even realize what I am doing. I do not miss the flicker of pain in his eyes, or the way he makes it disappear in a second.

My heart throbs in my chest, twisting and wrenching with each beat.

'I won't hurt you.' He murmurs, his voice a soft whisper.

You never have. I want to say it, but a lump is lodged so deeply in my throat that I cannot make the words out.

He knew what happened. He knew what was done to me. I am nauseous - my stomach twists as the room spins.

I did not fight enough. I should have fought more. I should have listened to his voice in my head. I should have fought.

I stared down at my body - at my wrist in a cast and my hand wrapped in gauze that once held an IV. I should have fought harder. I should have listened to his voice. I should not have given up.

It is the thought that stutters through my head like a broken record until my world falls dark.

A quiet knock echoes at the door, and Melchor is stepping in when my eyes crack open against the bright light.

'Good morning, Lily.' He says softly, offering me a smile.

My only response is a coerced gulp to force the lump away. It does not work.

'Lily, I spoke to your father yesterday.' He continues, moving past my silence. 'He and I both feel you'd be better off recovering away from here.'

'Where?' I croak.

Do not take me home. I never want to go back there. I never want to go back to McAuley.

'Our home.' Melvin says. I cringe away, realizing that Melvin was sitting right next to me. That I was wrapped in his arms. My shoulders tense against his arms,

and, as if he knew, he pulls away slowly.

Melchor is quiet a moment before he speaks. 'If you're comfortable with that.'

I felt and gave a breath I did not realize I was holding, relief and pain flooded through me simultaneously.

Home, but not mine. I was safe with the Shezor. I would be safe at their house. I would not be left alone. I would always be protected.

They would stop him when I gave up fighting.

'I want to go now.' I whisper, suddenly feeling incredibly exposed in a public place where vampires would not have the same capacity to defend me.

I look from Melvin to Melchor, hoping they understand the need I have to leave. If not from my words, then from my eyes.

Melchor simply nods at me. 'Karly is just outside with some

clothes. Melvin and I will take care of everything else.'

At Melchor's words, Melvin stands. His fingers brush against my good wrist as he leaves, tossing one last glance in my direction.

Karly enters before Melchor or Melvin leave. She is carrying two bags in her hands, setting them both down on the table at the foot of my bed.

'Sweetheart, do you want something eat?' she asks gently, laying her hand on my shoulder. The

pressure feels peculiar - soothing, but intolerable. I do not want her hand there. 'I made some soup for your throat.'

'Maybe later.'

'I have some clothes for you. We can leave as soon as you are changed out of that gown.' Karly says, touching the material of the hospital gown. She reaches for the bag, pulling out sweatpants, a shirt, and a sweater.

'Do you mind if I help you?' she asks, and I shake my head

instantly, ignoring the pain that spikes through my skull and down my spine. I did not even want to try getting dressed on my own.

Karly smiles at me.

She is incredibly gentle as she helps me sit up. I had not moved much, and now I understood why. Pain radiated through my body so sharply that I had to bite my lip to keep from crying out. It did not ease as I sat up straighter so Karly could help me change. She is fast - pulling my shirt over my head and guiding

my arms into the sleeves as I cringe in pain.

As she pulls the blanket from my legs, I catch sight of my discolored skin. The sight twists my stomach painfully.

Beg me, Lily. Beg me not to do it.

Karly covers my legs with the blanket, her thumb wiping at my cheeks. 'Don't look too closely, sweetheart. It will only make it hurt more.'

'How long.' I ask, staring at the tan blanket over my legs. 'They're so dark.'

It takes a long time for Karly to answer. 'You were brought here eighteen hours ago.'

'Oh.'

It seemed like much longer and much shorter at the same time. Longer, since there was so much that had happened. Shorter, because it seemed impossible that my memories were from eighteen hours ago. It felt much closer - as if they were

happening just seconds before they popped back into my mind.

I do not speak as Karly helps me into the pants she brought or as she helps me pull a thick sweatshirt over my arms.

I instantly hate the pressure - how restrictive it feels against my arms - and I shed it instantly. Karly watches but says nothing, simply folding the piece of cloth up and putting it back into the bag.

Karly stays with me, offering me food twice more, until

Melchor comes. He is carrying a wad of paper in his hand. He stands at the table at the foot of my bed, arranging the papers in a folder.

I knew there were rules about being discharged. Wounds needed to be healed and cleared of infection. Nurses and doctors bustled about patients checking vitals, making sure they knew how to care for themselves, asking for signatures on papers with medical and legal jargon. But now, it seemed as if no one cared. No doctor or nurses were

requested. No one asked me if I knew what to do with my cast before a shower. No one checked my wounds or asked me how to care for them.

I knew, if they did, I would not have answers. I knew if they asked me to stand and walk across the room - as they had in Phoenix when I needed boots and crutches - that I would not be able to. My ribs hurt too much to sit upright, even with Karly's help. Not that I wanted to sit upright at all with my pelvic

pain that made my stomach churn with nausea.

I was pumped full of pain medicine and antibiotics in Phoenix too. Nurses routinely checked my temperature - insisting it be below a certain threshold prior to my discharge. But here, Melchor did not seem to mind as Karly disconnected the machine wires from my skin.

Machines were shut off with each wire that was pulled, the stickers carefully eased off my skin.

'Charlie called.' Karly tells me, making conversation. 'He said he will visit today. He is happy that you will not be here anymore. He knows you do not like hospitals much.'

I do not respond.

'All done, Lily.' Karly says, and Melchor snaps the folder shut.

'Lily,' he says, his voice gentle. My heart pulled, unsure of what he was going to say. 'I know you are in a lot of pain right now, and it is only going to get worse as we

are moving you. Can you allow me to give you some pain medicine?'

'No.' the word is out of my mouth before I realize I have even said anything. 'No, I am okay. I do not. I do not need anything.'

I shiver, thinking about the pain in my stomach again and the blurred colors.

Melchor sits on the vinyl chair next to my bed, his eyes pleading with me. 'I know that you are afraid. I understand. But I cannot allow you to be in this much pain.'

'I am fine. It does not hurt.' I insist, my eyes burning with tears. Anger burns through me - anger that I am crying again, that the tears are blurring my vision, that Melchor and Karly can see how weak I am.

Melchor is silent for a long time, and I stare at him, pleading.

'Lily, you were under the influence of a drug called Rohypnol.' Melchor tells me, his voice slow, hesitant.

I wince at his words, inhaling so sharply my chest radiates

with pain. I turn my face away from him, as if that would shield my ears from his words. My vision blurs with memories of sluggish limbs and molasses thoughts. I cannot seem to focus - everything is weaving in and out, hospital and then my bedroom, Melchor and then the other man, tears from Melchor's words and his.

'It is a drug used to incapacitate. It is cruel to use, and even crueler to be victim to.'

Everything hurts, and I cannot differentiate between my

current pain and the pain of when the injuries were inflicted upon me. I cannot differentiate between Melchor's fingers on my hand and his fingers on me.

Watercolors. Melting images until they blur. Like everything is foggy.

'I won't do that to you.' Melchor tells me, his voice ringing with a sincerity that pulls me from my memories. 'Lily, I have never used medicines irresponsibly with you, and I will not ever do that in the

future. I have never given you reason to distrust me.'

I glance at him through tear-filled eyes. He was watching me, his expression resolved.

'I need you to trust that I won't harm you.'

Melchor's fingers rub at my palm. His fingertips are smooth, cold, gentle. I stared at them for a long time, hot tears cascading down my face.

The drug. Watercolors. The blackness that overcame the pain and hopelessness before I woke up to a much worse fear. I do not want to go to sleep.

'I don't want to sleep.'

'I won't give you that much.' Melchor promises.

My throat hurts with a sob I am forcing down. I pull my fingers away from Melchor, wrapping them around my wrist. It hurts. My bone feels like it is shattering all over again.

'Just take me home.'

Karly moves to my side, taking both my hands in hers. She has tears in her eyes. Her voice fills the room, gentle and quiet. She talks about nothing in particular - words that float past my ears, quenching the silence but hardly filling the void in my chest.

She tells me of an Island with bright blue water. She tells me of the fish that assume colored masks she had never seen before. She tells

me of white sand beaches that kiss the waves.

My hands tighten in hers when Melchor grasps my arm, his hand steadily immobilizing it.

'Deep breath, Lily.' Melchor murmurs, and then the needle bites into the skin of my arm.

I gasp, flinching closer to Karly. My body moves, even the arm that Melchor had been holding. A warm feeling was spreading through me - starting in my chest and expanding outward. As it moved, the

cold relinquished its grasp on me, taking the pain away with it.

'Thank you for trusting me, Lily.' Melchor massages my arm for a moment before letting go. 'Melvin will carry you to the car. Until then, try to rest.'

My body seems to settle into the bed more comfortably now. My head lulls back against the pillows, too exhausted to be held up.

Karly keeps holding my hands, but her voice is more distant than before. I try to listen intently,

try to grasp the words about colorful coral and tall palm trees. But they are all too fleeting. My body, once wrecked with pain, feels swollen with air and warmth. It is much harder to focus on anything else.

'You're exhausted, darling.' Karly finally tells me, brushing my hair through her fingers. 'Your body is ready to sleep now that there is no pain.'

I blink at her, noticing the energy it takes to open my eyes after the darkness falls over me.

'I don't want to sleep.' I whisper. The door opens and Melvin silently slips in.

'It's scary to sleep, I know.' Melvin whispers to me, his hands weaving into mine. 'But I'll stay with you if you change your mind.'

'Sam wants to meet tonight.' Dejen's voice is annoying. Jae, Vivian, and Dejen had begrudgingly returned home after an attempt at tracking an unknown that led them straight to La Push.

The house had been mostly silent until Dejen's arrival - Melchor in his study forging documents to replace Lily's at the hospital, Karly sitting in the den looking out the window waiting for her children to return home, and Naddalin Natalie huddled in a corner trying to foresee the future, the present, and the past simultaneously. The only exception to the silence was Lily who had whimpered and twisted relentlessly in her sleep until Melchor injected

her with something to ease her anxiety and pain.

His thoughts were utterly tormented, conflicted over whether her previous consent to his medicinal involvement would extend still. Her pained moans hardened his decision. She had slept the entire way home due to his pain cocktail - her body absolutely exhausted from trauma and stress - and he wanted her sleep to continue undisturbed for a few hours more.

Part of me was desperate for her to wake up and allow her to see that she was safe. She was home with me now. The other part of me was desperate for her to stay asleep and allow her body and mind to rest for as long as possible.

'When? Why?' Demands Karly. Karly had jumped up excitedly when they entered the house, feeling conflicted with dread and guilt at her excitement. She was hopeful that they had found something and was prepared to help them. Her

excitement was apparently - ready to get revenge for her child that had been hurt. But her dread and guilt at murder and violence was slightly debilitating.

I heard these same sentiments echoed in Vivian's thoughts earlier that morning - excitement at the prospect of hunting and destroying another rapist and remorsefulness at the thought of another girl having to relearn how to live. In the end, much to her dismay, it was not the scent of Lily's attacker,

and their hunt only led them to the boarder of the Reservation where the pack was waiting, prepared for a fight.

Now, Vivian, Jae, and Dejen had returned home.

'There's no point.' Jae says.

Dejen groans. I can hear him pulling himself away from the door dejectedly. He is ready for a fight. In his mind, and Jae's, we were already at war with the wolves. They were both fully prepared to fight the wolves to the death.

That is what they had intended to do with us tonight until Jae negotiated a temporary peace agreement. His intention was not peace - it was fairness. If the Mutts had their leader to lay the charges, we may as well have ours to refute them. We deserved to have equal footing against the mutts.

Melchor's thoughts are distressed. I do not want a war, not now. Too many lost lives. too much pain. 'There's always hope, Jae.'

'They believe Melvin did this, Melchor.' Vivian hisses. Her thoughts dart in my direction, filled with grief and pity. Emotions I had never seen in her thoughts before when they fell on me. I ignored her - I did not want pity right now.

'They're not looking for peace.' Jae agrees.

This is worse than I thought. Melchor was thinking.

I cannot see anything if they are involved. 'Melchor, we have to get away from this.' Naddalin

Natalie's voice portrayed her uncertainty and frustration. Even Jae's effort did not dissuade her anxiety. 'If they get involved, I won't be able to see anything.'

'Melchor says we can't kill them.' Dejen grumbles.

'If we leave, they'll suspect Melvin even more.' Vivian says. I am stunned into silence, shocked by Vivian standing at my defense so openly.

'If we stay, I'll be blind.'

'You already are.' Vivian snaps bitterly. Did not see Lily's attack, cannot tell us anything about who attacked her or why, cannot see anything about these scents we keep finding around McAuley. utterly useless.

Arrogant! Jae's mind screams at Vivian. He is furious at the attack on his mate. My muscles coil, prepared to break up a fight if it comes to it. Dejen's thoughts - also preparing to put a block between

Vivian and Jae - make me more relaxed.

He will deal with it.

Naddalin Natalie lets out an exclamation of distress but does not respond to Vivian's retort.

'We can't leave.' Karly says, interrupting the silent war between Vivian and Jae. 'Lily's father is here.'

'He's not in danger.' Naddalin Natalie protests. 'I need to be able to see. As much as I can.'

'When have we fled because the mutts told us to?' Dejen demands. 'There's a treaty for a reason. If they want us gone, let them be the ones to break it.'

'We can't leave.' Karly says again, adamantly. 'We can't take Lily away from here now.' Just think how that would disrupt her healing.

'Now is the time to leave, even if it means they suspect Melvin. Do you really think Lily wants to be here now?' Vivian says, her voice furious. 'There's no reason to stay.'

'Vivian, we're operating in the human world right now.' Melchor says quietly. 'Lily and her father are intertwined in this, and our decisions must take them into consideration. Charlie was open-minded enough to allow me to take her from the hospital, but we cannot leave the state.'

'If we leave, there is no chance of us finding who did this.' Dejen adds. His empathy for Lily - his sister - was strong.

'It's clear that we can't make that choice.' Melchor says firmly. No one speaks for a moment. The reality sinks in my mind now, and I could hear it in the minds of my siblings and parents.

We needed to stay in McAuley. For Charlie, for Lily, to hunt the monster. Consequences with the wolves be damned.

'There are too many possibilities.' Naddalin Natalie says, breaking the silence. 'I do not know how I missed this. I was watching

Mazel, Caius, Demetri, and Jane - in case anyone decided to do something against Mazel 's decision - and Victoria.'

'Maybe it wasn't Mazel or Caius.' Dejen says. 'How many guards do they have? Any one of them could have decided to come here. Get in the good graces of their masters. Who knows?'

Vivian scoffs. Certainly not Naddalin Natalie.

'I've been watching Lily's future, too.' Naddalin Natalie

mumbles. 'I should've seen.' She falls quiet.

Too many enemies. Jae's mental voice was worried. ' Mazel has been growing concerned with us for some time. Melvin's recent trip to Volterra did not help.'

I sigh quietly, filled with my own guilt as I stand. I needed to be downstairs, but I had promised she would not be alone. Karly, sensing my need to be downstairs, floats up to the room.

'I'll watch over her, Melvin.' She speaks. I would like to avoid the discussion downstairs. It is inevitable. but I do not want to be part of it.

I brush some of Lily's hair from her face, nestling it gently against the bruises on her neck. She was soundly asleep - a rare occurrence since her first night in the hospital. I needed to go downstairs.

'I'll be here.' Karly touches my arm, reassuring me. She will be safe.

I only nodded in acknowledge of her words, turning and leaving as quietly and quickly as Karly had entered.

Everyone's eyes flash to me as I step downstairs. Jae steps forward.

'This is exactly what Caius warned us of.' Vivian says, glancing at me. 'It has been two months. He decided to come check on her.' We

are lucky to be alive. Technically we've all committed an unspeakable crime. I knew we would pay for it eventually. We should have killed her -

My hiss cuts Vivian's thoughts off, and she snarls back at me.

My eyes narrow at her. Was she not defending me only moments ago? Did she have no empathy for Lily still?

Naddalin Natalie lays a hand on my arm, reminding me in

her thought that violence between us was mostly useless right now. You can get to her later.

'They would have killed her, Rose.' Dejen disagrees. Not raped her.

I wince, grateful he had not said the words aloud.

'Caius is not merciful that he would leave her alive.' Melchor agrees solemnly. Naddalin Natalie shudders in the corner.

'And I have been watching the Voltari or cult of fallen angels, Rose. Mazel, Caius, all of them. No one has decided about us.'

'That you've seen.' Vivian says. Each word is pronounced, each word a bullet that mentally shakes Naddalin Natalie.

'Perhaps it could have been spontaneous enough that it slipped your visions.' Jae mutters, simultaneously unhappy with Vivian questioning Naddalin Natalie's abilities and with the idea of others'

decisions that impacted us slipping through.

'Maybe we're reading into it too much.' Dejen shrugs. 'Look, there's a dozen scents around McAuley right now. We know there is a situation developing in Altoona with a rogue newborn. The news reported two more dead today which brings the total up to six.'

'It was too a perfect coincidence.' Melchor says, shaking his head. He sits down on the couch, looking more human than I knew he

could with his hands running through his hair and his face relapsed in stress. 'Naddalin Natalie and Melvin have not been hunting together in months. Naddalin Natalie did not see anything - '

'No!' I hiss at him, his thoughts ahead of his words.

'Melchor, you're not suggesting.' Naddalin Natalie narrows her eyes. A planned attack I would have seen. 'I would have seen a planned attack.'

'But you didn't.' I muttered to her.

Her eyes flash to mine. 'And it was not a coincidence. It is too perfect, like Melchor said.'

'What are you suggesting?' Vivian hisses, her eyes flashing between Melchor and Naddalin Natalie and me.

'They're playing with Naddalin Natalie's visions.' Melchor finishes slowly, his eyes on Naddalin Natalie.

Naddalin Natalie snarls at no one in particular, looking mutinous. 'That's not possible.'

'Isn't it?' I demanded, grasping her arm so she would look at me.' Mazel saw. In Volterra. He saw that you completely missed Lily being pulled out of the water. He knows your visions are imperfect.'

Her lips curl over her teeth. 'I've been watching him.'

'Yes, you have.' Melchor agrees. 'And yet your vision only came when I made the decision to

call you. It was my decision, Naddalin Natalie, that showed you what happened.'

'So, you think Mazel is behind this?' Jae demands, his voice hard. I see his hand flicker to Naddalin Natalie slightly, wanting to protect her.

'If Mazel were behind this, they would have sent a vampire and Lily would be like us by now.' A growl builds in my chest as I consider my words. How close Lily was to death, to a damned existence.

What a freaking idiot. We should have stayed away. Or killed her after that accident. She does not belong in this mess.

No, not necessarily. He would have killed her.

They are too cunning for that. Caius is too cunning for that.

The thoughts bombard me from multiple members of my family, and I narrow my eyes at each one in turn.

'Mazel values her too much!' I hiss at them, remembering my time in Volterra and his fascination with Lily's ability to block our gifts. 'He wouldn't dare waste the potential she has.'

Jae stares at me. 'Perhaps. But Caius had his own ideas, you said so yourself.'

'He wouldn't leave her alive.' I snap.

'The guard would not defy Mazel, neither would Marcus of

Caius.' Melchor says, holding his hand up to try and calm us.

Dejen's eyebrows pull together quizzically. He shakes his head. 'We are reading too much into this. What if it really was a coincidental attack?'

'What do you mean?' Melchor asks, rubbing the bridge of his nose. I should check on her. Her fever was a bit high last time.

'At least three vampire scents were in that house and one mutt.' Dejen explains. He eyes each

of us. 'There's no way a vampire or mutt would enter that house with those scents and.' He trails off, swallowing thickly. 'If I could have been a dumb human who took advantage of an empty house with a pretty girl.'

'That's absolute crap.' I could not stop the snarl that erupted from my chest. Dejen throws his hands up, surrendering.

'I am not trying to belittle this, man. I am just saying it would take a bold vampire to do this if they

knew who her friends were. Not to mention, she would be in much worse condition if it were a vampire.' Dejen insists. 'And we know it wasn't - the scent wasn't like ours.'

'Exactly - it would take a bold creature to do this.' I continue. 'Human or not, her friends are dangerous, and everyone knows it.'

'Melvin, hear him out.' Melchor tells me, encouraging me to listen.

'He had a syringe of Rohypnol. That was planned.' Vivian

says, her voice so soft I strain to hear it aside from the thoughts in her head.

I look to Vivian, appreciating that she is once again on my side. 'Chiaz got to the hospital less than two hours after I left. The window is too close. He came as soon as I left.'

'It would explain why Naddalin Natalie saw nothing.' Dejen says, but he steps back to show that his time arguing with me is over. 'If

they decided it quickly, knowing that you would be back soon.'

'Naddalin Natalie's visions are her problem, Dejen.' Vivian growls, her eyes flashing. Dejen touches her arm, wishing he could say something to her without her getting more flustered and angrier. He knew she would be more comfortable and receptive in private, though.

'It has nothing to do with the attacker.' Vivian continues. 'This is all Naddalin Natalie.'

'That doesn't make sense.' Naddalin Natalie argues, her voice growing in volume and seething.

Melvin, you have never blamed me for not seeing something or missing something in the future. Even when Lily jumped off that cliff. Let us not start now. Naddalin Natalie says, her eyes pleading. I will figure this out.

I nod at her once, slowly so no one else sees.

'Naddalin Natalie can't see the wolves, Vivian.' Jae hisses. He

was becoming tired of everyone blaming Naddalin Natalie. Naddalin Natalie's visions had never failed her before, except when it came to the wolves. But that was an issue with them more than her. Nothing about this situation made sense.

The attack was clearly not a spontaneous decision, but it was impossible that the decision had crept through when Naddalin Natalie was keeping such a close eye on our enemies and on Lily.

'How did you not hear anything while you were there?' Jae asks suddenly, his eyes wide as he turns on me.

'I heard nothing unusual.' I respond quietly. 'I wouldn't have left her if there was something concerning.'

Melchor sighs, shaking his head. He was utterly confused and devoid of answers.

'You should have heard something if the attacker arrived within an hour after you left her

house. We were still close to the area.' Naddalin Natalie tells me, her expression blank.

'I heard nothing.' I repeat again. It was true. The only thoughts surrounding us had been Lily's neighbors, most of which were busy with their weekend chores and plans.

'The easy way to figure this out is to just ask her.' Jae says, his voice frustrated. She knows what happened. We cannot do anything without the information she can give us.

Vivian and I hiss at the same time.

'You have no right to ask her.' Vivian snarls. She takes a step forward, sinking into a slight crouch. Dejen's hand comes down on her shoulder.

'Calm down, Rose.' He murmurs.

'This is a matter of her future, Vivian.' Jae snaps back.

'And this is a matter of her current state. She is not well.' I

respond, my voice just as angry. 'You don't know how she'll react.'

'I get it.' Jae moves deeply as he speaks. 'She's vulnerable. She is scared. She will have a panic attack if she thinks about it too much. But -'

'Well, I refuse to ask her.' Vivian growls. 'And I will not let anyone else do it either. She has the right to keep this to herself. It is bad enough we all know she was assaulted.'

'Naddalin Natalie's can't see a thing.' Jae continues as if Vivian had not interrupted him. 'We do not know who did this. We cannot do not even know enough to determine if there was a plan behind it.'

'Work with what you have.' Vivian snarls. 'He used Rohypnol which means he is weak. He is human. He cannot evade us for long. He is a dead man when we find him.'

'I'm with you, babe.' Dejen says quietly. 'But we don't know any of that for sure.'

Vivian hisses at him, her expression furious. 'If any of you dare try to ask her, you'll have to go through me.'

'Enough of this.' Melchor stands up, looking outside as the sun is setting. 'I'm sure the pack is waiting.' We do not need to give them more of a reason to be anxious.

Naddalin Natalie stands beside me - close enough that our

arms can brush. It was her silent and secretive reminder of the bond we shared and every intentional touch on her part made me feel slightly better despite the horrid events of the last few days. She keeps her thoughts focused on the pack - not trying to communicate with me at all, for which I was thankful.

The boarder marking the Quileute reservation is silent and still, as if the tree rooted in the soil beneath our feet knows what is happening.

Six wolves stand before us. Tall - their heads high and their stance wide. Sam was in the center, his eyes glowing. To his right, Paul and Embry were waiting for their command. To his left, Seth, Leah, and Jared. Chiaz Naztherth was not here tonight.

He was a coward.

I glance at Melchor on my right. He looks at me, and then turns to face Sam and the rest of the wolves. He takes a step forward,

making Jae take a step forward as well.

'Thank you for meeting us.' Melchor says after a moment, as if we had been the one to call this meeting.

Leah growls, her teeth bared, her mind wild with disgust.

I can see Dejen in the corner of my eye, his arms tense. He was only here to level the playing field. Dejen, Jae, and I were most equipped to take on the wolves. Melchor was blind with compassion,

and Naddalin Natalie was blind in another, much more unusual, way. Vivian had opted out of the meeting in favor of staying to protect and watch over Lily with Karly.

This is not a meeting for pleasure. Sam's voice was displeased. Chiaz informed us of an attack on Lily.

I look toward Melchor, repeating the words tersely.

The lies of her attack. It was one of them, filthy, murderous bloodsuckers.

Chiaz's a wuss. Cannot believe he took her straight back to their arms again.

They killed her by now. Sam, we must act.

We know it was you, you monster.

This breaks the treaty. What are we waiting for? Let us do this!

Be quiet! Sam's voice finally overpowers the others', and each of them fall silent at his order. The

power of the alpha command silenced them. I had heard Chiaz talking to Lily about it once. Sam could control the others while in wolf form.

You have the right to explain yourself, vampire. I am losing patience with your kindness.

I was impressed Sam had yet to lunge - perhaps, far beneath the thoughts I could read, he honestly believed I was not responsible for this.

'They're not convinced it wasn't me.' I spit between clenched teeth. Melchor frowns.

This is going to be difficult. Melchor looks toward me, and then back to Sam. I do not know what Chiaz told them.

Chiaz was not here in the clearing for me to scour through his thoughts. Where was he hiding? What was he hiding?

'My son is not responsible for this.' Melchor says his voice hard.

Show us proof.

'Chiaz has been to her room. You know, as well as the rest of us, there was another scent there.' I snap. Naddalin Natalie touches my arm, reminding me to be civil. Not even seconds later, I feel Jae's calming influence fall onto the entire clearing.

Sometimes I hated Jae. Sometimes I wanted to feel angry. Right now, I am more than grateful he was pacifying me. I breathe deeply, trying to remind myself that

the mutts were not my enemy tonight. My wrath was awaiting someone else entirely.

'Melvin was not here when the attack occurred.' Melchor says, his voice full of conviction. 'You must see the reason, Sam. If we were as cruel as some believe, I would not have worked to help Lily live once her life was in my hands. She would not be at my home recovering under our care.'

Is she not in the hospital anymore? Sam's voice rang with

horror. What goes on in your house, away from prying eyes, is uncertain.

I relay the words, my voice muted, and my body numb. The clearing has been quiet for a long time.

'Lily is family.' Naddalin Natalie finally says, her voice strong despite her strangled state of mind. 'We only want what is good for her and to protect her. She is safe with us right now. If you need to check on her to ensure her well-being, you are more than welcome.' Her voice held

a false sense of calm, and I knew that she was just as close to snapping as I was.

'Just know, mutt, that our patience wears thin, too.' Jae's voice is taunt, and even Melchor does not admonish him for the words. Instead, Melchor looks to me to add something, but I stay silent. I did not care what the wolves thought. Lily would be alive and safe if I were with her - wolves be damned.

Melchor was trying to placate them. Naddalin Natalie

needed them out of the picture and out of her visions. Jae was trying to defend the family. I simply wanted to return to Lily.

Sam's thoughts are a frenzy for several long moments. They overpower the mental voices of their counterparts. He is shifting through the facts - cognizant of the scent Chiaz had shared through his memories. He knew that it was not a vampire. He knew it was not me.

If you say this is not you, then who did this? Sam's voice was

hesitant. He did not want to admit he believed us.

'We don't know.' I respond flatly. 'None of us recognize the scent.'

What do you know? Paul demands coldly. Sam, despite wanting to berate him for interjecting when not asked, steps aside to allow Paul to speak.

I can feel my fists clenching. We knew nothing.

'They want to know what we know about her attacker.' I will tell my family. Jae's face goes hard immediately, his eyes narrowing.

Jae questions.

'Jae?' Melchor looks to his newest son. Jae grimaces, weighing the options. Telling them would not be detrimental, but it went against his instincts to share vital information with others who were not allied with him.

'We have the scent.' Jae says, his voice slightly cold. He and

Dejen had gone to Lily's room and tracked the scent for as long as they could. They were not successful in their endeavor. 'We think it was a planned attack.'

Planned? The thought echoes multiple times throughout the pack, along with more confusion and some insults thrown our way. Some wolves were not entirely convinced of our innocence.

Sam does not silence his mutts this time.

What makes you think it was planned? Sam steps back into his spot, pushing Paul aside. His thoughts fly back to Chiaz - the memories Chiaz had shown of him running Lily to the hospital, how he fought with Melchor until he finally relented and allowed her to be taken through the doors of the ER.

'He wants to know why we say it's planned.'

'The timing - perfectly between Melvin leaving and Chiaz arriving.' Jae explains. 'And perfectly

dodged each of our gifts so we didn't know what happened until it already occurred.'

'Whoever did this was careful not to kill her.' Melchor adds, his voice upset. 'Lily's injuries are severe, but not life-threatening.' Sam says, though he did not seem interested at all. While you may have convinced us of your innocence this time, I am sure you understand these events change nothing. Lily has made her choice and we will honor it. Our

generosity will not become a habit - do not test our patience again.

My teeth snap together tightly at his thoughts. Lily had made her choice, and so had Chiaz Naztherth.

'I'd expect nothing else.' I hiss in response. Melchor looks at me, his eyes questioning.

Sam continues as if I had not spoken. The treaty still stands. You may not come onto our land or near our kind.

'I'm sure you can understand why we might not extend certain courtesies when trying to catch this monster.' I hiss at him. Naddalin Natalie puts her palm against mine, again reminding me to stay calm. We are here to placate them. To keep them out of things.

Crossing the border will be a violation of the treaty. Sam repeats. Any other human harmed will be a violation of the treaty. We are prepared to respond to such a threat.

'Noted.' I hiss.

We may have offered protection to some in your absence, but it is not our responsibility any longer. We take care of ourselves.

With Sam's final words, the wolves slowly retreat into the trees and disappear together.

'Well?' Melchor asked me after a moment, his eyebrow raised curiously.

'They want us to stay off their property.' I hiss. 'The treaty still stands.'

Dejen feels relieved. Good for them, freaking idiots. Finally got their brains back into their thick skulls. Of course, we did not do this to Lily.

'So, they'll stay out of it?' Naddalin Natalie breathes, relieved.

'As long as we stay off their land, they don't care what happens.' I snap, enraged. 'They do not care what we do with Lily - whether she

lives or dies. They only take care of their own.'

Hypocrites. Protectors only when it is convenient for them.

Melchor nods, grimacing. He was not happy with this meeting. 'There's no shortage of protection for Lily now. We take care of our own, too.'

I growl, my fist connecting with a trunk of a large tree. The wood groans, cracking and toppling over three other trees as it falls. Furious with the wolves, for

abandoning Lily. Furious with myself for allowing her to fall into the hands of danger to begin with. Furious with my brothers and sister for not being able to track down the monster today. Furious with Melchor that, despite his best work, Lily still had weeks of physical recovery ahead of her.

We did take care of ourselves, and I needed to take care of Lily. She is mine to take care of. Mine to avenge. Mine to protect.

'Where are you going?' Naddalin Natalie demands, her eyes wide, her hands outstretched as if they were about to catch me.

'Hunting.' Tracking. Destroying a monster.

'Melvin,' Melchor starts, his voice warning. 'She needs you at home right now.'

'I can't do anything for her right now.' I respond, my voice harsh as his mind infiltrates mine with images of Lily's injuries. I was not a doctor - I could not heal. I was a

vampire - I could kill. 'Not while he is out there. Alive.'

'Yes, you can.' Melchor insists. There is so much you can do. She needs you home with her.

'When she asks for me, I'll be there.' I snap in response.

That is not fair to her. Naddalin Natalie tells her, though she was debating whether to join me in my hunt.

'Take care of her, Melchor.'

'Here you are, dear.' Karly places a small tray on my lap. Three layers of blankets shielded my legs from the heat of the dishes' contents. Somehow, despite its size, Karly had piled on enough food for three on the tray. My lack of appetite had not been apparent to Karly, or she was motivated by the little food I had eaten since waking up in the hospital.

'Thank you.' I mumble, trying not to show how much tomato

soup and turkey sandwich made my stomach churn.

'Charlie, are you sure I can't bring you anything?' Karly asks, her voice full of motherly concern. It was strange seeing it expressed from Karly to my father.

'I ate.' Charlie, slightly awkward at Karly's doting. 'Thanks.'

Karly smiles in response, mumbling a remark about eating some dinner later. She leans down tucking my blanket around my feet as she exits the room.

'She's very attentive.' Charlie notes after a long pause.

'Yeah.'

'Mothers are just like that.' He says it more awkwardly than before. He clears his thought, coughing.

I enjoyed Charlie's visits, but today it seemed to drag. He usually stopped by before work to check on me and then again in the afternoon on his way to the reservation, calling at least twice during the day. Naddalin Natalie had

informed me that he was not staying at the house in McAuley anymore. He had taken up a cot in Billy's living room instead. Despite Melchor and Karly's insisting, Charlie did not want to relocate to a guest bedroom upstairs.

'Are you going to eat?'

I spy the food, nausea spreading through me. 'I am not hungry right now. I ate breakfast late.'

That was a lie. Karly had served me breakfast late since I had

woken up late after a particularly restless and nightmare filled night. But I had not eaten a single bite of it. The towering pancakes and bowls of fruit were not appetizing, and it was not for a lack of Karly's trying. I tried to cut up a pancake into tiny pieces to make it look like I had eaten a bit, but I doubt Naddalin Natalie was fooled as she carried my tray away.

Charlie grimaces, looking saddened by my response. 'You should try to eat a bit. Smells good.'

'I will.' I tell him, trying to make my voice sound confident and promising. 'Later.'

I stare at the tray, trying to figure out how to relocate it from my lap to the table beside me. But my wrist - fully encased in plaster - and my ribs - broken, bruised, and hurting - made the task look daunting.

Charlie must have seen my internal struggle, and he stands up and moves the tray for me without a single word.

'Mind if I check the score?' Charlie asks, and he is reaching for the remote before I respond.

The TV offers a welcome noisiness to the room that was otherwise mostly silent. Except for our stilted conversation - painfully twisting around recent events, injuries, and relocations from McAuley - and Karly's occasional entrance and exit, there was not much going on. The house was more silent than I was used to when I woke up this morning. I did not have an

exact tally on who was home - but it was limited to only Karly - who was giving me space with my father now.

Charlie makes a disgruntled sound, and I glance up at the TV.

'Who is winning?'

'Oh, uh. Did not get there yet.' Charlie mumbles in response, his eyes fixed to the TV. I follow his gaze, looking at the screen where a pretty woman was discussing the news. 'It's about Altoona.'

'Oh?' I lean my head back against the arm rest of the couch, snuggling the blankets - which had warmed from the tray - closer to my chin. I was cold, and tired. I felt like the entire world was pressing down on my body, making it difficult to move and breathe and think past the pain.

'Did you hear about Altoona?' he asks darkly, shaking his head.

'No.' I had not put aside a lot of time to watch the news these days.

'A bunch of disappearances.' Charlie explains with a slight shake of his head. 'Stay clear of that area, okay?'

'Got it.' I mumble, closing my eyes. I do not have the ability to go to Altoona now. I could barely stand without assistance. And I did not need to be in Altoona to fall into danger. It came straight to my bedroom on a normal day.

A shudder rolls down my spine as memories thaw in my brain. I swallow a lump, forcing my eyes on the TV to find a distraction.

'A kid from McAuley went missing there a few months ago.' Charlie sighs. He is quiet for a long moment, listening to the muttering of the TV. 'I am glad you are here, kid. I. I am sorry that I am no good at this. That I cannot take care of you like they can, but I am glad you are here.'

I force my eyes open, blinking away the blurriness of my exhaustion. 'You take care of me, Dad.'

Charlie does not respond immediately. 'I am just. I am sorry, Bells.'

I offer him a small smile, unable to find words to respond and positive that if I did open my mouth my voice would crack with emotion.

Charlie reaches for the remote, flipping the channels until he finds the game he wanted to watch.

We watched in silence for a long time. Occasionally, I would close my eyes and wake up with the suspicion I had fallen into a light sleep for a few moments. But I was never sure until I opened my eyes to find Naddalin Natalie sitting casually at my feet, conversing with Charlie.

'My team is winning. Billy bet against me.'

'Good bucks for you.' Naddalin Natalie grins. 'It is apparent Altoona will win. You took a smart stance, Charlie.' She glances

at me, winking. Of course, she would know who was going to win. Her visions had not failed her before. Except for the one time it did when she did not see my attack.

Her hand is on my calf, silently offering me some comfort. I have missed spending time with Naddalin Natalie. I have rarely seen her since coming home from the hospital.

'You seem very sure of yourself.' Charlie spies on her, his

eyes narrowed. 'You know Kickball that well?'

'Dejen and Jae talk about it all the time.' Naddalin Natalie rolls her eyes. 'I'm not much of a sport myself - I do have a killer pitching arm though.'

Charlie laughs heartily. 'I'll have to see that.'

Naddalin Natalie merely grins in response.

I let my eyes fall close again, hoping the darkness might

quell the painful drumming at the back of my head. My whole body seemed to throb in tune with my heart. When I open my eyes again, Naddalin Natalie has disappeared, as has more of the light in the room. A few small lamps and the TV ghosted the room with dim light.

'Good evening, Charlie.' Melchor's voice is bright, much more cheerful than I am used to. I opened my eyes, noticing that most of the light had drained from the room.

'Hey Doc.' Charlie nods, grabbing for the remote to turn off the TV. Melchor waves him off.

'Just checking on Lily and then I need to head out again.' Melchor explains easily. 'How did the Braves do?'

'They lost.' Charlie raises an eyebrow. 'You like ball?'

Melchor chuckles, sinking into the cushion next to my legs. 'It's the only sport I consider worth playing.'

'Hmm, that seems to be the attitude here.' Charlie responds easily. 'Beat Billy out of a few bucks. He does not know Kickball well.'

Charlie would have a field day with Dejen and Jae. Though, he would never make a cent unless Naddalin Natalie was on his side.

'That's unfortunate.' Melchor sighs, shaking his head. He turns to me, concern etched into his eyes. 'How are you feeling?'

I do not miss the way his voice drops, keeping my father out of his conversation.

I swallow with some difficulty, trying not to let my pain shine through. 'I'm fine.'

Melchor's eyes float from my face to the cold tray of food. 'Not hungry at all?'

I shake my head slowly, then wince as I immediately regret it. My head hurt too much to be moving around right now.

'Can you try to eat some? Toast? As much as you can stomach.'

'I'm really not hungry.'

'I know, but you're in pain and I don't want you to be.' Melchor reaches for one of the sandwiches, breaking off a small section of the bread. 'Eat this. It should help.'

I gaze at the bread he was offering, reluctantly taking it. It was not much - three or four bites at most. But it seemed like an overly daunting task for my nauseated stomach and aching head.

Melchor waits a moment, watching me with sympathy as I force myself to swallow a single bite. It made my stomach churn in the worst way.

'I'll be back.' He tells me. As he leaves, he offers a sigh at the TV when a batter strikes out. It was for a show. It was for Charlie.

I swallow another bite, trying desperately not to gag in disgust as I chewed. There was nothing wrong with the bread. There was something wrong with me.

Melchor returns only a moment later, watching me for a moment with an expression of sympathy before silently permitting me to put the rest of the bread down.

Melchor was more gracious about my eating than Melvin.

My eyes slip around the room, looking for Melvin. I had not seen him since I woke up this morning and he helped me to the couch. He had touched my face gently, whispering something too soft

for my ears to catch and I had not seen him since.

'Where is everyone?' I asked Melchor.

He offers me a small smile. 'They've gone out. I am sure they will be back soon.'

'And Melvin?'

Melchor's eyes hardened. 'Hunting.' His answer is short and curt, though I am not sure why.

'Good.' I sigh, slightly relieved. He had not hunted recently.

His eyes had been dark every time I had stared into them since waking up in the hospital. If anything, my relief angers Melchor more. This behavior confuses me.

'Why didn't you go?' I ask, spying on his dark eyes.

He offers me a small smile, though it seemed forced. 'I was at the hospital.'

'I thought you took time off.'

'I was handing in my resignation.'

My stomach flips uneasily. 'What?' I whisper. 'Why?'

'My family needs me right now.' Melchor answers, his voice quiet but full of pride and conviction. 'My family is my priority.'

I do not respond - I do not know how to. Again, my throat fills with the pain of holding back tears. Tears of my love and gratitude for Melchor and for the rest of his family. Tears of anger that this

happened to me. Tears of betrayal that they did not save me.

Melchor sits with me for a moment, looking between me and Charlie to occasionally make a remark about the players on the screen before he excuses himself from the room.

'You are settling well here?' Charlie asks me, his voice uncomfortable.

I nod.

'Do you need anything? Anything from your room?'

'No.' I hiss, a little too harshly. Charlie recoils slightly at my tone. 'I am fine. Thanks.' I add hastily, trying to soften my tone.

He nods in response, grimacing. 'Is this better for you, Lily? Being here and not at the hospital?'

I pull my eyes away from Charlie, focusing on the blankets covering me. My fingers find the stitches of the hem, picking at them.

I did not want to converse with Charlie about this.

Everything was better than the hospital. Anything except being in McAuley.

I involuntarily wince, remembering the day I had come home from the hospital.

Bright, clear sunlight filtered against my eyes, making me cringe. My eyes were painfully sensitive. Cool sheets rested over my bed, and I snuggled deeper into the pillows.

Except, instead of the usual warmth and comfort I reveled in, my mind filled with shocking fear and pain. Hands pressed over me, knees digging into my stomach, hot breath on my neck, pain in my skull.

My body screams as I hurl upwards, pushing ghost hands and knees off my body. I sob, shoving the sheets off. My hands shake, my cast weighing down my arm, my body throbbing and slowing my movements. My limbs tangle in the sheets, and fear pulses through me.

I am fumbling, struggling off the mattress as fast as I can as walls close in around me and pressure leans itself on my lungs. I cannot breathe. I cannot breathe. I am not safe. He is here. I cannot breathe. God, it hurts. It hurts so much. I cannot breathe. It hurts.

The edges of my vision were dark.

'Lily, it's okay.' Melvin's voice was near me, and I reached for him, my hands clawed. Where was he? I could not find him. My hands

grasp and claw at the air, finding nothing.

Where was he? Why hadn't he been there? Why hadn't he protected me?

I am not safe. Not now. I cannot breathe. Why can't I breathe?

'It's just me.'

I feel the steel-cold touch of Melvin's hand on mine, pulling me against him. 'Lily, you are safe. You are home.'

'No.' My voice is so loud I flinch. 'Get me out. Get me out.'

'Lily,'

'I can't breathe.'

'You're in my room.'

Memories were running through my head - a thousand times I had seen them, in every angle, in every combination. They flew across my vision so I could scarcely figure out whether I was in my room or Melvin's. I did not want to be on the bed.

'Get off.' I scream, unsure of where the man was. Unsure of if he would be trying to get to me again. 'No, no. I need - I - go.' I gasp, my hands coming to my neck. I cannot breathe. I cannot breathe. I need to leave. I do not want to be here. I cannot breathe. 'I- get me out.'

'Shh. You are in my bedroom, Lily. You are in my home.' Melvin soothes, his hands brushing against my back. His touch with light, but it sent jolts of pain through

my body. His voice sounds so distant, so foggy. Like he is in a trance. 'Just breathe.'

My hands find his shirt easily now, I grasp it with all my strength.

How do I breathe? I do not know how to.

My heart was being squeezed by the same pressure that was on my lungs. The air was thinning.

I hear hums of noise. I cannot seem to hear anything but the sound of my lungs dragging air through my lips.

My vision is black, and I claw at my face, trying to get my eyes to open. I do not want to be sucked in again. I do not want to go to sleep. I want to fight this time. My eyes are open. I cannot see beyond the black and red splotches of color.

'You're going to be fine. Just breathe. In and out.'

There's too little air for me to breathe. Too little. It is too thin. I cannot breathe it. I need to go. I am not safe.

'Good, Lily. Keep breathing.' Melvin hums. His hand is cold and hard as ice, and it makes me shiver. 'Don't hold your breath. You are doing so good.'

'I'm sorry.'

'You have no reason to apologize.' Melvin murmurs. I clench and unclench my fists in his shirt, realizing the movement helps me

focus less on the thinning air. I am hot - feeling furiously feverish and sweaty - but shivering so hard I am sure my teeth are chattering.

'Take me out of here.' My voice shakes and my throat hurts with sobs trying to escape.

'You're not in McAuley, Lily.' Melvin whispers. His fingers wipe my cheeks. 'You're at my house. You are in my room. You are safe here.'

'I don't want to go back.'

'You don't have to.'

I do not have to. I do not have to go back to McAuley. Back to that house. The laundry is still in the dryer. My room is a mess still. I never cleaned it. My book is on my undusted desk, along with a dozen assignments for school, exactly where he put it. My unmade bed - a testament to a violent crime.

'I can't breathe.' I gasped.

'You're having a panic attack.' It is Melchor's voice now. His fingers pressed to my wrist, and I

pushed them away. 'There's plenty of air to breathe. Focus on one breath at a time - in and out. You can do this, Lily.'

'Melchor, please.' Every breath sent searing pain down my side and stomach. How could I breathe when everything hurt so much? When each pain from my injuries reminded me of how I got them?

'Tell me what you need.' Melchor says, his voice gently probing at me.

'Everything hurts.'

'Do you trust me, Lily?' Melchor asks me, his voice soft. Melchor grips my hand in his, not hard enough to cause me pain but I was sure my bones might shatter of their own accord. 'Can I give you medicine? Do you trust me to take care of you?'

I shake my head, tears blurring my vision so that Melchor was a fuzzy figure with striking blonde hair and pale skin.

'Close your eyes, Lily.' Melchor tells me. Closing my eyes does not protect me from the bite of the needle, but the warmth that spread through my body and eased my anguish made it worth it.

I give in, again. Because it is easier than fighting. It is easier than suffocating to death. It is easier than enduring the pain while he holds me down and violates my body.

I let the darkness wash over me and consume all my agony as it does.

I had led Melchor to sedate me. I let him give me medicine. And I woke up feeling worse than before. Melchor promised it was the lingering effects of the medication, but it felt too much like waking up in the hospital again. I never wanted to have medicine in my body again.

'Bells,' Charlie's voice interrupts me from my thoughts. 'Have you given it any more thought?'

'What?'

He swallows thickly, looking uncomfortable. 'The police should have evidence, Bells. We cannot convict anyone without evidence.'

My heart stutters in my chest. Why was he mentioning this again? Tears well in my eyes, remembering the last time he had talked to me about this.

'Lily, who did this?'

'I don't know.'

'Not Jake or Melvin?'

'I don't know who it was.'

'You don't know because you never saw them or because you don't know them?'

My chest hurts.

'Lily?'

'I don't remember.'

'Crap.' Charlie's voice is so loud I cringe.

'You should do a police report, Lily.' Charlie's voice was not firm, it was not a question.

I cringe as he rummages around, reaching for the drawers of the table beside the bed. 'It's just a few tests, Lily.'

'I'll think about it.'

I thought about it, but I knew I would never change my mind. 'I don't want to.'

'Lily.' Charlie's voice conveys his frustration and anger. 'I am not asking you if you want pizza for dinner. This could happen to someone else if we do not get him.'

'It won't, Dad.'

'How can you be so sure? Lily. What do you know?'

'Nothing. I am tired.'

'Lily,'

'Dad, I said no.' I tell him, my voice a whisper. It would not happen to anyone else because no one else associated themselves with the Shezor the way I did. I could not submit myself to more invasive tests.

'I know, I know.' He says quickly. 'Why won't you do it?'

I am quiet for a long time, my fingers picking at the stitching of the blankets on top of me.

'This is the one thing I can do for you.' Charlie's looking at me, his eyes begging. 'I know this is a small town and the department is small, but we have resources. I will talk to the police up in Altoona. We will find him.'

'Whoever it is. the report will not do anything.' I whisper. Begging was better than forcing, but I would have preferred to have

neither. 'Some things are just beyond the law.'

'What's that supposed to mean?' Charlie snaps, his mouth set tightly in a line.

'Nothing. Just leave it, please.' I wrap my arms around my body, wishing Melvin were home to save me from the rest of this conversation. He would easily have been able to walk in, change the subject and tell Charlie what he needed to hear.

He was out hunting. He needed to hunt. Despite the positive behavior, my stomach tightens. The last time he went hunting I ended up in the hospital. Only this time, I was in a house of vampires to protect me. But the vampires had a death threat they did not know about hanging over their heads.

Charlie huffs, leaning back in his seat. 'Allison called.' He finally mutters, meaning I would be at least partially forgiven for my refusal to do a report.

'And?' I asked, my breath strangled in my throat.

'I told her you're fine.'

'Thank you.'

'I can't keep lying to her.'

'I'll take care of it.' Correction, Naddalin Natalie would take care of it. 'Thanks, Dad.'

'I should head out.' Charlie stands. He looks uncomfortable and flustered. 'I'll come by tomorrow, okay?'

I nod in response. He looks like he wants to say something more, but he just offers me a stilted smile and disappears from the room.

I stare at the TV screen for a long time, ignoring the way the flashing and flickering lights burn my eyes and make my brain throb. My stomach churns. I was not sure if it was from my conversation with Charlie or the TV.

My wrist hurts. Pressure picking at the sides, displacing my skin, and crushing my bones. A hiss

of pain escapes my lips as I bring my cast hand to my chest, protecting it from nothing.

'Lily? Are you all, right?' Karly's soft voice is next to me. When I open my eyes, she is standing in front of me, her expression one of concern.

'I want to take a shower.' I told her. I had not yet. I did not know how long I had been home from the hospital, only that I was always too tired to do anything but sleep and force a few bites of food into my

stomach. Maybe if I did Charlie might stop asking me to let people collect evidence of his assault on my body.

Karly nods easily, a smile of sympathy on her lips. 'Of course.' She hesitates then. 'Lily, I am not sure you would be able to shower yourself. Can I help?'

My shoulders rise in carelessness of their own accord. Karly had helped me change once at the hospital, what difference did it make now?

Karly offers me a smile, lifting the blankets away from my body. I shiver as the chilly air attacks. Her arms slide beneath me, lifting me effortlessly despite her petite figure.

The movement of being carried from the living room made my stomach roll with nausea. I was more than grateful when Karly stopped in the bathroom next to Melvin's room, sitting me down easily on the side of the large tub.

I lean against the tiled wall, my body aching with exhaustion.

'Ready, darling?' Karly asks me. There was a chair in the shower already, a soft cloth covering the plastic seat. Karly mentions something about how difficult it might be for me to sit. I was too tired to respond.

Karly slips a piece of plastic around my cast, tying it tightly on my arm. She helps me out of my clothes, tossing them into an empty hamper in the corner.

I shake my head slowly. 'I'm so tired, Karly.' I murmur.

'I know, sweetheart. I will help.' She brushes her fingers through my tangled hair. Karly supports my weight as I stand, helping me settle onto the chair. The soft cloth beneath me helped ease the pressure of sitting on my pelvis, but it still hurt.

My eyes drop down to my body unconsciously and suddenly I wished I had not. My thighs were covered in layers of dark purple

bruises in the shape of handprints. Long, tender strips where his fingers had grasped my thighs. Fingers pressed into my skin, etched so clearly it felt like they were still wrapped around my legs.

I shriek, pushing the invisible hands away. 'Stop it.'

'Lily?' Karly turns, her voice full of concern.

I look up, away from my legs at Karly. But it is not Karly I can look at. It is something much worse behind her.

A breath of air escapes me, as if I had been punched. Worse, as if someone were on top of me, forcing air out of my lungs with pressure that broke ribs.

A small girl sat behind Karly. Her skin was white as sheet paper and disfigured with swelling. The pale undertones scarily contrasted by the deep bruises that trailed from her cheeks down her jaw and neck. The bruises did not stop. The more I stared, the more I saw. Black and purple splotches down her

side - over her ribcage, down her stomach, slipping towards her hips and back. Prints shaped like fingers, palms, knees. Teeth.

I could feel his hands gripping my skin, his nails digging in as they pushed my legs apart. His hands as they gripped my jaw, holding my screams within me. His knees pummeled into my stomach, holding me down.

'Shh, it's okay, darling, breathe.' Karly's voice was close to my ear, brushing my hair from my

face with her hands. It took me a second to realize that I was hyperventilating. The breaths I dragged in were released before they did any good for me. The terror in the girls' eyes reflected my own. It ravaged my head, swirling through my face and settling deep in my stomach.

The body of a girl who did not fight. The body of a girl who let him dirty her.

'In and out, there you go.'

I follow her instructions, letting her guide me through some deep breaths to keep my mind off the memories.

'It hurts.' I cry, gripping Karly's arm. The painful memories and the bruises on my skin. They both hurt. But I did not know which one hurt more. Which one got priority. Do I stop moving to stop the aching from my bruises or do I stop breathing to numb my brain?

'I know, dear.' Her eyes were full of moisture, though she

could not cry. She lets me hang on to her for a few more minutes before she gently pulls her arm away, talking to me the entire time. She moves away from me, using a large towel to cover up the mirror. My reflection disappears. But I stared at the towel, knowing what lay behind it. Knowing that even if I could not see the mural of blue, black, and purple, everyone else still could.

A testament to my failure. To my weakness.

'I'm going to wash your hair, dear.' Karly tells me. She guides my head back, so I am staring at the white, tiled ceiling. Scalding tears roll down my face, but I bite my lip to keep from sobbing.

They were tears of failure, of disgrace, of disgust. I gave up. I let the darkness take over. I stopped fighting. Just like how I stopped fighting with Melchor's sedative. I am weak. I yearn for darkness rather than fighting.

The water is warm as Karly directs it over my scalp. Her fingers are so tender and gentle.

She talks to me in her sweet, comforting voice the entire time about nothing. She talks to me about an island Melchor bought her decades ago and how she has never seen bluer water. She will take me there one day, she promises. She talks to me about Melvin's house in Texas - he took her to visit it once when she was a newborn. She tells me about the pictures of his parents

he had packed away. He still owned the house and went back every so often to check up on it. She tells me how Melchor spent years researching his life in the mid-1900s to pinpoint his exact birth year and find his mother who died during his birth. He found his father's grave somewhere in Europe, but nothing more. Records were just not kept then the way they are now. She talks to me about Naddalin Natalie's obsession with clothing and how it had driven the family crazy at first. But,

eventually, even Dejen learned to live with Naddalin Natalie, wanting to shop for him.

She finishes washing my hair and slowly and carefully begins washing the rest of my body. She lets me use a washcloth to put soap on my torso, but my legs and arms are much harder with my broken ribs, so she takes over. She keeps her distance from my thighs at first, but with tears in my eyes, I plead with her to wash his filth away. With a sorrow-filled expression, she

complies and gently runs the washcloth over my thighs. I begged her to do it repeatedly and she complied, washing my skin until I had no energy left to beg her for more.

She is incredibly careful to avoid the left side of my stomach. I have no idea why and I am too scared to look. When her back is turned to me as she is retrieving more soap, I let my fingers glide over the area. It is covered in gauze and shockingly dry, though I was sure

she had at least let water wash over me. It is incredibly painful, and I gasp, drawing Karly's attention. I feel ashamed as her eyes catch my fingers on my stomach, but she sighs quietly and sits on the edge of the tub tenderly.

'You had surgery, sweetheart.' She moves my hand from my stomach, taking it in both of hers. 'You'll be tender there.'

'Why?' I whisper. My voice was hoarse. It was always hoarse.

She hesitates, her eyes conflicted. 'You had some internal bleeding.'

'What was bleeding?' Was it stopped? Did they have to take something out? I never took human anatomy in high school - I knew my prospects of working in the medical field were low considering my ability to handle blood. I had no idea what was in the left part of my abdomen. Was it a kidney? Appendixes always had issues, did my burst? Or my

liver? Could I survive without my liver?

'Your spleen.' Karly answers easily. She removes the spray of water on my shoulders, rinsing the soap off. I was shocked by the slight stinging of my skin as the water ran over my body, but, like before, I was too afraid to know what happened.

I let Karly finish washing me, almost wishing I could just fall asleep in the chair. I was so tired.

Karly's done quickly and she offers me a large towel to wrap myself in. It is almost useless, because even though I try my hardest to drape it over my shoulders, my ribs protest painfully, and my encased hand makes it impossible for me. Karly, understanding my pain and struggle, takes the towel from my hands and drops it onto my shoulders. She is gentle as she uses another cloth to wipe my legs dry.

I am surprised when she holds up a large shirt and not a hospital gown. She understood how uncomfortable the pants and sweatshirt were.

Karly does all the work dressing me in a shirt. It falls over my body, thankfully covering my thighs. I hope Melvin never saw my thighs. I know Melchor did. Melchor blocked his thoughts from Melvin. I did not want Melvin to know - to see - what happened. I did not want him to know how badly I was hurt.

Karly pulls my hair out from the neckline, wrapping it all in a towel to dry. Then, without a single word uttered between us, she helps me up into her arms, breezing me into the other room.

Melvin's room - previously transformed with a massive bed with gold covers and a 4-poster metal frame - had been returned to its original state. The couch had been moved back to its original spot where the bed once had been situated. The only difference was that it was piled

high with blankets and pillows for me to sleep on.

My heart clenches as I realize the room is empty. Melvin is not here. He was not downstairs, and he was not upstairs. He is still out - hunting. Quenching his thirst. Feeding the part of him that was not human.

I wanted him here now, with me.

Karly helps settle me onto the couch and props me up with multiple pillows. Just as quietly as

before, she pulls my hair to the side and begins running a comb through it until all the knots have disappeared. It felt so nice having her take care of me that I found myself leaning into her embrace and quietly protesting her lack of combing until she started again.

'What do you need, Lily?' Karly asks me, her voice soft.

What did I need? I needed it so much, but I did not know what it really was. I needed my body to not hurt so much, my mind to not feel so

strangled by what happened. I needed Melvin. I did not know where he was. I had not seen him all day.

My vision flashes to the bruises. On my thighs. On my face. On my neck.

'What happened?' My face burns red as I asked her, my eyes dropping to the floor.

Karly's fingers pause in my hair before they begin pulling again, tugging each strand apart and then braiding them back together soothingly. 'What do you mean?'

My stomach rolls uneasily, as it had been since I had first woken up in the hospital. This time it was different though.

He hurt me. He bruises me. Melchor had to cut me open and fix me. He had to reset my broken bones and stitch me and fix my lungs.

Melchor had seen everything He had seen every battered, broken, bruised inch of me. And what he had seen, so had Melvin. What the nurses and doctors who worked over me saw, so had

Melvin. Melvin had seen more than just the visible bruises on my neck. He had seen my thighs with handprints inked onto them, too.

He made my spleen bleed. He made my chest hurt when I breathed. He ripped me so badly it hurt to sit.

24 Smarty

-And-

Melvin knew it all.

A small bowl appears in my face just seconds before my stomach

forcefully expels whatever was in it, which was nothing. My body heaves, but nothing escapes me. My ribs scream as I crouch over, and my back spasms with each convulsion of my torso. Hot tears roll down my cheeks, setting my bruises aflame as if they were made of molten lava.

Someone's hands are in my hair, trying to comfort me. I wanted them off. But my body was so consumed by my heaving that I was unable push the hands away.

Someone's hands are on my back, touching my ribs. I wanted to scream. I could barely breathe between the forced chokes and coughs, much less utter a sound or plea.

Karly had seen too much. She had seen my entire body. She had washed the bruises and pains away. She knew how weak I was. How pathetically incapable I was of fighting back.

What Karly witnessed, so had Melvin.

My stomach churns over and over until my body is too exhausted to do anything. The bowl disappears and I am left with the cool hands that are holding back my hair. Karly wipes my face with a damp napkin, cooking soft words I cannot hear.

My temples are pounding, perfectly aligned with the sobs making my entire body tremble.

Everything hurts so much that I can do nothing but cry.

I close my eyes, cringing away as Melchor comes close.

'Drink some water, Lily.' He speaks.

I want to reject it, but no words can escape me between my screams.

He put a straw to my lips. My jaw aches as I sip, and the water burns as it crawls down my throat.

'I'm sorry.' I croak as Melchor uses another clean napkin to wipe the tears from my cheeks.

'Don't be.' He murmurs, discarding the napkin. 'Let me feel your ribs.' He presses his hands gently to my side, but even his soft touch makes me cry out in pain. His fingers run along the sore parts of my side and my vision seems to sparkle with black dots. 'We need to be careful. I do not want you to displace these fractures.'

'Melchor.' Karly's voice was frustrated.

'Try to breathe deeply, Lily.' Melchor tells me, finally removing his

hand. The reduced pressure did little to ease the pain. 'You jostled your ribs too much just now.'

'I can't remember it.' I say to him, sobbing. 'I. don't.'

I could remember. But not enough. I remember the black, the watercolors, the feel of his hands. I needed to remember it all, but I wanted none of the memories in my brain. I needed to know how he had hurt me.

Melchor's thumb runs over my cheek, collecting more tears as

they fall. 'Perhaps that's for the better, Lily.' He murmurs. 'Memories can be a prison.'

'What else did he do to me?' I moan.

'We don't have to talk about that right now.' Melchor suggests. 'Let me -'

'No, no.' I cut him off, shaking my head. It made me dizzy, and I had to grab the sheets around me to steady myself. 'I need to know now.'

Melchor presses his lips into a fine line. He did not want to tell me, and I did not want to hear it. I did not want to throw up again.

He sighs quietly, sitting down in the chair next to the couch. He sits dejectedly - his elbows on his knees, his hands clasped together. 'How much do you want to know?'

'All of it.'

No more surprises. No more looking in the mirror accidentally and being terrified of the girl staring back.

He nods slowly and I take a small, shuddering breath.

'You have a concussion.' He starts quietly, his voice strained. He taps the back of my head gently. 'It is here. You might feel nauseous, and I know you have had a constant headache. Dizziness, too.'

'Melchor.' Karly whispers, her voice warning. His eyes flash to hers momentarily, before he looks back at me.

'You have multiple cracked ribs. One rib splintered and

punctured your lung. I took care of that in the ER when you came in. Your chest will be sore, and you need to try to keep your breathing slow and even so it can heal.'

'I remember that.' I shiver involuntarily, remembering the feeling of Melchor's cold hands against my side and the pain and the nurses talking about a rape kit.

'Yes, you were conscious when I put in a tube to relieve the pressure.' Melchor nods slowly, his expression in pain. 'Your spleen

ruptured, and we had surgery to alleviate the bleed. Your wrist is broken, too.'

My fingers trace my cast, pressing down occasionally as if that would relieve the pain in my bones. My wrist was being squeezed. Too tight. It hurt.

I flex my fingers, cupping my wrist to my chest. It hurt.

'What does Melvin know?'

I hear Karly sigh deeply. Melchor glances at her, his lips set in a thin line.

'Everything.' Melchor whispers, remorsefully. 'He knows it all.'

It is silent in the room except for my shallow, gasping breaths.

Melvin knows everything. He saw everything. He knows what was done to me.

Karly's rubbing small circles on the back of my hand.

I want to throw up again.

It is a battle inside my head - trying to make myself stop replaying how I got each injury.

He hit my head on my headboard. That is probably when I got the concussion. He crushed my ribs with his hands. He ruptured my spleen with his knee. I remember when he broke my wrist. I remember when he gripped it so hard black

spots painted my vision and shrieks filled my ears.

Where was Melvin? Why wasn't he here? He had not been there before.

I want to throw up again.

I wipe my cheeks with one good hand. My cheekbone hurt. My good hand did, too - my wrist was sore. There was an ugly bruise wrapped around my wrist.

I hide my hand beneath the blankets, disgusted.

Melvin saw my wrist too. He saw my neck. He saw what I saw when I looked into the mirror in the bathroom. He saw me, a girl who is unable to fight for herself. A girl who gave up.

Melchor lays a hand on my forearm, squeezing gently. 'It is a lot to process, Lily. We can talk about it when you are ready. For now, I want you to try to relax. Your body is tired.'

'I don't want to sleep right now.' I argue, shaking my head. I am

so tired. I am so, so tired. And it hurts so much. I want to sleep and never wake up.

What if I had dreams? I always have dreams. I do not want to have dreams. I do not want them to hear me talking. I do not want them to know how weak I am.

'We'll be here the whole time, darling.' Karly tells me, bringing my attention to her. 'We won't leave, I promise.'

That only scares me more. She will know I am having dreams.

She will hear me talking. She will know what I am dreaming about. She will try to wake me as Melvin did. Melvin learned not to wake me. Karly did not know that yet.

Melchor presses my shoulder gently, encouraging me to lay against the pillows on the bed. 'Sleep now, Lily. We will talk when you wake up.'

The second my body touches the pillows, it relaxes. I hate the way it relaxes but it feels so good. I am so tired. My eyes fall close

as I hear Melchor murmuring to me that I just need some sleep.

I dream of a blonde man injecting me with medicine. First, it is Melchor with his bright blonde hair and gentle hands. Then it is not. Then I can feel hands on my body, pressing so hard they break bones and ink themselves on my skin. I can feel hot breath against my skin and pain exploding in my chest. And then I gave up. Because it is easier to let the darkness consume me and to be weak than to fight.

The days seemed to creep by at a speed no one quite recognized. Some days the sun set faster than I could have blinked, and other days they would not pass no matter how much I begged. Lily's nightmares only worsened, leaving her exhausted and plagued with headaches throughout the day. Recently, she had begun refusing all forms of medicine - pill or otherwise. Melchor had been battling himself for two days about slipping small doses of pain medicine into her

drinks but that was a clear violation of her autonomy and she decided against it, despite how much pain she was in. She still refused to sit or lie on any bed - remaining steadfastly sleeping on sofas downstairs or the couch in my room. Sometimes, I would watch her eye the couch skeptically, as if she could not remember whether she was comfortable sitting or not.

While she slept, however, disrupted, I slipped out of the house to hunt. My tracking had taken me as

far as the Northern border of British Columbia and as far south as Nevada. I had yet to come across the scent in Lily's room. Recently, I was following random scents of vampires that had been moving in and out of town. I was never able to track them for long with the rain washing away their scents. It pained, and appeased, me that Lily was so consumed by her pain that she did not notice my disappearing. I was thankful I could do something without leaving her feeling unloved and unprotected.

Now, Lily was asleep on the couch in the den after Naddalin Natalie managed to force a small bowl of chicken broth into Lily. She had resisted, insisting that she still felt sick from her earlier panic, but Naddalin Natalie shut her down quickly.

'Don't you lie to me, Lily.' Naddalin Natalie snapped, sitting cross-legged on the couch with the bowl of soup in her hands. 'I saw the future and I saw that you eat this

soup whether you like it or not. And no, you will not throw it up later.'

That had been a lie. Naddalin Natalie had not seen the future. Lily's future was void of everything but death in Naddalin Natalie's mind.

Lily had not learned of Naddalin Natalie's troubles with her visions and resigned from the fight. She ate the soup without another complaint. We could all see her struggle to finish just a few spoons of it, her body so used to not eat that it

was no longer capable of consuming more than a few mouthfuls. The meal had exhausted Lily to the point that she immediately fell asleep. Melchor was content with the fact that she had gotten something into her body, at least. We would continue to work her up to more nutritious, filling food that her body was secretly craving.

'The killings in Altoona are getting worse.' Dejen informs Melchor as he steps downstairs. Melchor breathes a sigh, shaking his head.

'I've heard this much.' Melchor responds, grimacing. 'Too many injured and missing for just a single nomad - it must be a coven.'

'It's strange they're staying.' Naddalin Natalie says.

'We'll continue to monitor the situation.' Melchor announces firmly. 'There is little else we can do without getting involved ourselves.' We cannot afford to be involved with this right now. His mind falls to Lily, thinking of her nightmares and rapid weight loss.

I listen to their conversation, not adding anything myself.

My fingers find the bruise on Lily's cheekbone, slowly tracing the edges of the black and purple discoloration as it moves toward her neck. He choked on her.

Monster.

Naddalin Natalie slips into the room quietly, sitting down at the end of the couch with her arms wrapped around her legs.

'What are you thinking?' Naddalin Natalie asks me. She had been quiet the whole night - her thoughts ridden with guilt and annoyance at herself, sadness for Lily, and confusion about the blank spaces in her abilities. She had gone through hundreds of theories as to why she was not able to see the future anymore.

Her eyes, darkening orbs, stared at me blankly.

'You shouldn't feel guilty, Naddalin Natalie.' I mumble to her.

Naddalin Natalie scoffs lightly, rolling her eyes. 'Don't tell me what to do, Melvin. Especially when you are feeling the same thing.'

Despite it being two weeks since the attack, the bruises on Lily's body were still darkening on her skin. It was unusual - but something Melchor chalked up to her sudden malnutrition.

I shiver remembering Lily's panic when she saw her face in the mirror for the first time. It had been an accident - she had been taking a

shower when she caught her reflection. Two days later, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror in the hall when she caught her reflection. Her grief at the bruises that wrapped around her neck and cupped her jaw and cheekbones debilitated Jae.

I could only stomach a few moments of her cries before disappearing from the house.

I needed to find him. I need to kill him. He was a monster.

We should have held up a mirror in her face when she was in the hospital. They told her everything all at once and let her panic one time. Lily should have been kept entirely in the dark. She would be better off knowing that not everyone was privy to her injuries.

All the mirrors had disappeared from the house when I returned.

The low whispers of my family's thoughts were being

interrupted by more unfamiliar ones - wolves.

I could hear the low rumblings of Chiaz Naztherth's thoughts before he called me. We need to talk.

'Chiaz Naztherth is on his way to talk to us.' I say quietly. The house goes silent at my announcement, Melchor and Dejen both breaking their conversation to look at me. Jae, who had been upstairs, appears in the doorway, defensively. Naddalin Natalie's

thoughts are furious. He has been away for two weeks. What gives him the right to come now? She was fuming.

'Maybe he wants to feel important.' I mutter shrugging. Or he genuinely cares to see Lily.

The thought frustrated me more than I wanted to admit.

Why not come earlier?

I shrug at her, tracing the bruises around Lily's wrist lightly. He held her down.

He was a demon.

I stand, slowly pushing Lily's weight off my body. I instantly regretted it, seeing how uncomfortable the movement makes her in her light sleep. Melchor, Jae, and Dejen follow me out the front door as we move to speak to Chiaz and his friends. They were standing an equal distance apart, much farther from the house than would be considered normal for a conversation.

'Good evening.' Melchor murmurs to them, nodding in their direction.

Jared, Embry, and Paul stand tall on Chiaz's flank, all defensive and waiting for an order to attack Chiaz. Chiaz had no intention of giving that order tonight.

We found two scents on our land, right near the border. Chiaz informs me bluntly.

'Could have been nomads passing through.' I told him with a

slight shrug. 'There are plenty of vampires that frequent this region.'

Melchor peers at me, hoping I would explain the other side of the conversation that no one else was getting.

'Two scents on their land.' I explain hastily to Melchor, not in the mood for conversing. Melchor nods, as does Jae, though my words were not directed at him.

Strange that they would be here. Dejen is thinking.

'Some vampires from Altoona may have come South.' Jae says, shrugging slightly. 'Did they harm anyone?'

Not this time. Chiaz remarks coolly.

I scoff. If wolves were what they thought of themselves, they should be able to defend themselves.

I relay the information to Jae, who nods quizzically, recalling his information about newborn habits. The mess in Altoona was newborns who had no sense of

cleaning their messes. It just was not clear who had changed them. As Dejen had thought of, a newborn vampire had little control or care to finish a meal.

'We'll keep on the lookout for any additional scents in McAuley.' Melchor tells them. 'So far, we have encountered no other vampires or the scent from Lily's room. Thank you for the update from your side, we will extend the favor if needed.'

Chiaz nods in response to Melchor. I did not come as a favor to you.

'Then why did you come?' I question, my voice cold.

'As much as we appreciate the help, your energy might be better spent on others. endeavors.' Naddalin Natalie says, her voice harsh. 'Tell your pack of mutts to stay out of our business.'

Lily is our business.

'Lily was your business.' I correct angrily. 'Not anymore. We will get it now.'

The other wolves take a step back, wanting to return to their lands, but Chiaz says. His thoughts are directed only at me now.

I need to talk to Lily.

I grimace, slightly annoyed at his firm request. It was clear he had no business here except to talk to Lily. The information he was passing along was an ill-planned excuse.

I am talking to her whether you allow me to or not.

I glare. 'That's her decision.' I mutter to him, turning my back as I walk inside the house. I hear him retreating to the forest, intending to phase back, and come to speak with Lily.

When I enter the living room, Lily is awake, though barely. Karly is coercing more water into her body, encouraging her to drink at least a few more sips from the cup. I settle down on the end of the sofa

and Lily hesitantly touches the bottom of her feet to my thigh. I sigh slowly, wrapping my hand around her ankle, offering her the comfort she must have wanted. She recoils but does not pull away fully.

If only I knew what was going on in her head, I would understand these strange behaviors of hers. I would understand the strange way she reacted to food and water now, as if she wanted to starve. I would know what kept her

writing and crying in her dreams and left her scared of sleep.

Now, I realized the years of studying medicine and psychology were useless when I simply relied on my mindreading abilities to understand people. Now, without any practice at normal, non-verbal cues, I was at a loss with Lily - the only human that even mattered.

Naddalin Natalie used to complain that Lily was a terrible patient with her always belittling her pain, but this Lily was much worse.

This Lily seemed as if she would break at any moment, but she always refused to admit weakness.

'Chiaz is outside.' I tell Lily slowly. I do not miss the way her body jumps, her eyes wide with a strange excitement. Her sudden change of stature makes my dead heart prickle with something - annoyance or jealousy of the dog. 'He wants to talk with you. Is that all right?'

'Yes.' Lily's voice is the happiest I have heard since she woke

up in the hospital, and that makes me slightly more upset. Had I done something wrong to inhibit these feelings in her? There was something about Chiaz Naztherth that brought them all out that I did not have.

I do not miss the pride in Chiaz's head, either, as he walks giddily into the house to talk to Lily.

'A little privacy, please?' He mutters to me as he passes by, dropping onto the floor next to Lily's head. 'Hey bells.'

I sigh, slightly irritated, standing up. Lily watches me without a word, though I can tell she dislikes my threat of leaving.

'Hi.' She squeaks quietly, with a small smile on her face.

'You look like crap.' Chiaz retorts with a shake of his head. I stiffen at his words, but Naddalin Natalie puts a gentle hand on my shoulder, reminding me to give them their time and conversation.

'I think I might kill him.' Naddalin Natalie says to me. She sits

on the kitchen island, pulling her knees to her chest.

'I think I'll help.'

We stay wordlessly across from each other, both staring at the marbled countertops.

I was, without shame, listening to Chiaz's and Lily's conversation, and Naddalin Natalie - slightly more shameful - was doing the same.

'Are they feeding you at all?' Chiaz asks. 'Or is your diet

strictly blood?' It is. Dunno how sick they are over here. Do they even have food?

I grit my teeth tightly, trying not to let his thoughts get to me. Chiaz Naztherth had never been one for decorum.

'No. I am just not hungry.'

'So, you're just anorexic now.' They are intentionally starving her.

'That's mean.' Lily mumbles under her breath. I had not noticed

how weak her voice sounded today. Last night's dreams had truly exhausted her.

'Are they keeping you awake at night too? Throwing water on your face when you start dozing off?' Chiaz jokes, though his thoughts were dark, remembering how he and his sisters faced nightmares following their mother's car accident.

Despite his clear attempts not to think about it, his mind kept fishing back to the day he yanked clothes onto her body and raced her

to the hospital. My body cringes in pain each time I see Lily in his thoughts.

'You should come to the Rez, Bells. My house is not a royal palace, but at least we fed you.'

'They feed me here.'

'Sure.'

'Stop it.'

'Seriously, Bells. You look like a ghost.' Chiaz says his voice is much grimmer than before. She will kill herself in a week like this. Why

isn't the doc doing anything? Does he even want her to get better? Charlie said he had the header out of the hospital faster than normal. Something about comfort for her. That was stupid.

'Get some sleep. I will come back later.' Need to talk to Sam

'No.' Lily's voice is panic-ridden, and I hear her grasp Chiaz's clothes, keeping him where he was.

What?

'I don't sleep well.'

'I can see it in your face.' You look worse than when he left you for dead. I bet your dreams are back.

I wince slightly at Chiaz's memory of Lily's skinny, exhausted form. She was a ghost when I was gone, but she looked worse now.

'It's land of the living dead over here.' was Chiaz's nonchalant response, not hinting at his grim thoughts. 'Probably wouldn't be able to sleep here either.'

'I have nightmares.'

Do they wake her up when she starts screaming at night? I used to have awful nightmares after Mom died.

'I'm sorry.'

'I don't like to close my eyes.'

'Maybe Melchor can give you something for that -'

Lily's quick to protest, as I expected her to. 'No!' she cut him off sharply, her heart panicked in her chest. 'No medicine.'

Chiaz sighs loudly. 'Yeah, okay.' He is quiet, then he continues. 'What are you going to do then? Drive yourself to exhaustion until you cannot help but sleep?' That is the Lily thing to do.

Lily does not respond.

'You really do look like crap, Bells. I am serious, why don't you come to the Rez for a bit? We can go to the beach, have some food, and then I will safely return to you here in like two hours. Do not worry about the leech, I will deal with him.'

She looks like she is dead. Bet that is the way he likes her - looking like a meal or a bloodsucker. Pathetic. I would never treat her this way. I did not before.

I grit my teeth, my jaw locking tightly.

I knew he intentionally thought provocatively to get a reaction from me, which was incredibly frustrating when Lily insisted that we get along. As immature as it was of me to consider, Chiaz Naztherth had been the one to

start the fight when I tried to make peace with him. He was the one who brought the bikes to Lily's father. He was the one who stood there, thinking of all the ways I had harmed Lily and he had patched her up. He was there, reminding me that if I left, Lily would eventually be content with him.

And I could do nothing but listen because he was right. He had taken care of Lily and saved her life in all the times I could not, he had witnessed all the ways I harmed Lily

with my actions, and he was right that Lily might have loved him one day if I had stayed gone long enough.

But I was not gone for enough time. Lily's love for me was so incredibly potent that she risked her life without a thought to journey to the most dangerous city on the planet. She did that for me.

Now, at this moment, Chiaz and I wasted each other over the same girl who had picked me but might have picked him had I given them more time.

'I'm too tired, Jake.' Lily responds only moments later. 'Maybe another time.'

'Bells, don't do that.' Chiaz whines at her. 'I am serious, come with me. You can sleep there if you want.'

'No.'

'Bells, Charlie is already out on the Rez with Billy. He misses you; you know. He always talks about how quiet and different you are on his visits, how he misses how you used to be. He came to the Rez right after

his visit with you today. He looked awful.'

I clenched my jaw even tighter. This is not what he should be telling her. Of course, she would be different. No one is ever the same after a traumatizing experience, let alone one so violent and cruel. No one expected her to be the same.

'No, Jake.'

Chiaz sighs again, more defeated. 'Another day?'

I hear the scraping of Lily's head on the couch as she nods slowly.

Did the leeches tell her to say no? Manipulative freaks. Damnit.

'Bells, what happened?' Chiaz says after a long moment of silence. I stiffened; my hands pressed hard against the countertop. Naddalin Natalie shouts me a worried look, a warning not to go into the room and interrupt their conversation.

'What?' She sounds groggy, like she was falling asleep when he spoke.

'That day. What happened?'

Lily does not respond immediately, and I recognize the way her breaths are turning into short, anxious pants. She was going to have a panic attack. 'Nothing.'

Chiaz scoffs at her, nearly laughing. 'Crap. No one looks like you two weeks after nothing happened.'

'Ask someone else.' Lily mumbles. 'I don't know what happened.'

I know she has a concussion, but it is not bad enough to cause memory loss. One of the leeches has some memory control thing. Why did Lily even stick around after the hell they put her through?

'I'm serious Bells, stop joking around.'

'I'm not.' Lily responds stiffly.

'I know you're lying.' Chiaz snaps at her quietly.

'If he makes her upset, I'll break his bones.' Or she would just hate him enough that she would decide on her own to never see him again.

Naddalin Natalie's eyes flash to me, dark orbs filled with understanding.

'If you want the truth, go ask Melchor.' Lily's voice is a little angry when she responds. 'He's the one that treated me anyway.'

I wanted to go into the room and push him away from her and promise that she did not need to tell anyone what happened. No one else needed to know if she did not want them to.

'You know I was the one who found you, right?' Chiaz asked her, his voice slightly hurt. He remembers the painful contortions of her body when he first found her, the wheezing of her breath as she struggled to breathe with her punctured lungs and broken ribs.

How he had grabbed a blanket and wrapped her body up before rushing her to the hospital.

'I remember.' Lily mumbles quietly.

Chiaz is quiet for a long moment, and I can hear him debating how to respond to her, how to make his words less blunt. 'Then you know I have a pretty good idea of what happened.'

I hiss under my breath and Naddalin Natalie squeezes her hand

on my arm, reminding me to stay calm.

'He's gotten her to think about this more than we have.' Naddalin Natalie reminds me quietly. 'Let him. She might talk to him.'

'He's more willing to risk her breaking, Naddalin Natalie.' I growl at him. 'Pushing her only makes her panic.'

'Let him, Melvin.' Naddalin Natalie's voice is firm, and I glare at her, upset with her demand. Talking helps, sometimes. Let her talk to her

friend. You know we need this information, too.

Chiaz Naztherth did not deserve Lily as a friend.

'I am here, Lily. Which means you can trust me.' Chiaz is saying, and I can hear the desperation in his voice and thoughts to get her to say something to him. He was pushing her much farther than I had ever, and I was incredibly hateful of his stupidity.

'Why weren't you here before?'

It was Lily. I will always be here, even when they all leave you like nothing. I was with you every time you needed me when your bloodsucker was gone.

'I was, Bells.'

'Now, Jake. I mean now.' Lily's voice is so timid, almost fearful of his reaction to what she was saying. Did she expect him to be angry with her? To leave her as I left her? 'Why did you leave me at the hospital?'

Chiaz's voice falters as he struggles to find an appropriate way to explain it to Lily. 'I could not stay. Sam told me to leave, you know how it is with the alpha thing.'

'Right, I forgot about that.' Lily mumbles. I cannot tell if she is still mad at him or not.

'But I'm here now.'

Lily does not respond, and I can taste her salty tears with every breath I take. He made her cry. I was getting increasingly aggravated by him talking to her.

'Enough torturing her!' I hissed under my breath, fully aware that the mutt could hear me. 'Tell her what you need to and leave.'

I can hear Karly's disapproving thoughts upstairs, upset with my hostility towards Lily's friend. I ignore her.

'I was at the hospital every damn day, Bells.' Jake swears firmly, ignoring me completely. 'I could not go inside knowing it was safer for you if I was outside protecting the

hospital. Ask any of your bloodsuckers, they all saw me.'

Lily breathes a shaky breath in. 'Thank you.'

'I will always be there to protect you, Lily. I swear to my life.' Jake tells her gently. 'Even if, from now on, I must follow you everywhere I go until the bastard is killed. Even if it means picking up the pieces of you when they all leave you again.'

I hear the marble countertop crack loudly beneath my

hands as he speaks, as he mentions my departure again. As his thoughts echo the prospects of Lily being his one day.

Naddalin Natalie watches me wearily, but her thoughts are seething.

Chiaz Naztherth was not as easy to break as the countertop, but I would gladly do it.

Lily does not respond again.

'For now, though, it is best that you do not starve to death. I do

not think the bloodsuckers know how to use the kitchen.' Chiaz chuckles bitterly, and to my utter shock, I hear Lily make a small sound under her breath with him.

I could feel my whole-body course with euphoria - I am not sure she had laughed at all since she wound up in the hospital. The fact that Chiaz elicited that laugh made me furious, but Lily laughed.

Naddalin Natalie and I are still standing across from the now shattered counter when Chiaz walks

into the kitchen. He spots the crack going through the marble, grinning widely.

'Was it something I said?' He passes me, reaching to open the fridge. 'Damn lot of food for vamps who do not eat. How much blood did you lace it with?'

'The pots are there.' Naddalin Natalie tells him, ignoring the rude comment. She gestures towards a cabinet next to the stove. 'If you need something, we can make a trip to McAuley.'

'Nah, it's fine.' Chiaz shrugs, grabbing some ingredients and laying them on the cracked countertop. 'She's not on a human diet, I heard last time.'

Naddalin Natalie grimaces slightly, irritated by the comment. 'Watch yourself, mutt.' She hisses, walking out of the kitchen.

'I'm not surprised you didn't tell her I came to visit.' Chiaz says to me, his voice slightly accusatory as he envisions me with dark eyes.

I grimace, my jaw hard as I stare at him. 'I understand that Lily considers you to be a good person and even a friend, but that is where my insight ends.'

'So, you stop her from seeing me and manipulate the facts.' Chiaz snaps, annoyed. His eyes narrow in my direction and I can see how difficult it is for him to turn away from me, returning to the carrots he was chopping on the counter. 'I know you stopped her all those times from coming to the Rez.'

I do not respond. I watch as he cuts the carrots ruggedly without precision.

'You know, she called me. She asked me to come pick her up when you left.'

I looked away from Chiaz, knowing it would be difficult to not attack him if we made eye contact. 'I'm sure you can understand why I might be uncomfortable with Lily being around wolves.' I muttered in response, not even caring that I was attacking his species.

'Afraid she'll realize that she'll just turn into a snack if she stays here?' Chiaz seethes. He was getting bolder and viler in his words.

'Careful, mutt.' I force my voice to be calm, but it is a lost attempt. 'You're on our side of the border now.'

'And I am sure you know how I feel about her here with you - a merciless bloodsucker. The reason for the treaty.' Chiaz spits.

I can feel Jae's influence, trying to calm us both down and I

want him to stop. Chiaz seems slightly uncomfortable by the manipulation of his emotions, though I am not sure he realizes it is Jae's doing.

'Chiaz, I would never harm her.' My voice is incredibly bleak when I respond, and I know it is the bizarre form of exhaustion that Melchor finds himself facing at times. It was strange - I was incredibly tired, though I did not seem to crave sleep or rest of any sort.

Chiaz turns to glare at me, his hands shaking. His thoughts flew back to the ghost of Lily when I had gone. 'Do you even know what she was like before? Has Charlie not told you anything?' She was dead in that forest, bloodsucker.

'I left to protect her. To prevent something like this from happening.' I hiss at him, seeing red. He bares his teeth, gripping the knife in his hand.

'Maybe you should've stayed away.' He snaps at me,

turning back to the food. She would have realized what was good for her. She would have learned to live again.

His thoughts were infuriating me - he was remembering how Lily had improved after they became close, how she started smiling and eating more. I grind my teeth tightly together as he arrogantly imagines fixing her up until she is perfect because I, as always, was the root of her issue. And I, according to him, would never

be capable of helping her; only harming her.

'You know you're not good for her either.' I tell him quietly. 'Neither of us are.'

He seethes, staring at the vegetables, his hands shaking. Get out of this rotten place. 'I'll send some food with Charlie.' He tosses the knife onto the counter, leaving the kitchen quickly.

The front door slams as he exits the house.

25 Debates

Instead of going upstairs to debate with him, I decided to go to the sitting room with Lily. She is asleep on the couch, her face distorted in pain but still unconscious. I settled down on the couch beside her, my fingers rubbing at one of the fading bruises on her arm. They were healing so slowly. Her body had no excess nutrients or energy to focus on recovery - it was purely attentive to survival.

She was still alive. She was still breathing. My reason for existence was safe beside me.

It was a mantra I kept up in my head to limit my thoughts of finding her attacker and ripping the dog's head off his shoulders.

My body feels heavy when I wake up as if I weigh a thousand pounds. Moving my fingers is like trying to move through pounds and pounds of sand. Melvin is silently beside me, helping me sit without a word or hesitation. My muscles in my

body are sore and every movement makes me want to cry. Crying would only make Melchor insist on medicine, which would only make me panic and none of that would ease the exhausting pain I was feeling.

'How did you sleep?' Melvin asks me. His voice sounds unnaturally forced. It was strangely familiar.

How did I sleep? Terribly. I felt as if I had not slept at all. My head was pounding worse than it did on my first day in the hospital. Was

there maximum pain for concussions? I had had plenty in my life, but they never seemed to hurt as much as this one did. I had never experienced such debilitating nausea or dizziness either.

I was sorely frustrated.

Melchor had been promising my pain and aches would ease with time, and they did. For a few short days slow, deliberate movements did not send spasms of pain through my muscles the way they did before. My nausea trickled

in and out, allowing some time for slow eating and drinking to appease those around me. Though my nightmares had not lessened, it was easier to fight the memories in my waking hours when I was not shunned by my pain.

But it all came back. Raging and furious with its short absence. Since yesterday's panic attack and fainting spell, I had felt the pain return with vengeance throughout my entire body.

'Fine.' I mumble. Melvin did not need to hear my woes about sleeping. I did enough sleeping for him to understand that it was never satisfying.

'Any dreams?' I had heard this tone from him before, I just was not sure when.

My heart stutters under his quiet, patient gaze. Yes, so many dreams, Melvin. I dreamt of it repeatedly. I felt his hands on me. I felt my wrist breaking in his grasp. My legs get pushed apart. I felt his

knee on my stomach. I felt the pain in my chest as I begged him not to do it. And each time, I slipped into a strange blackness that never reduced the pain or the awareness of what his hands did to me.

My body shudders without my permission as I remember the horrifying dreams. It was strange that I had not woken up screaming or even talked at all. Whatever surge of luck I was having now, I hoped it did not end. No one needed to know what I was dreaming of and how

disgusted I felt waking up each morning.

'No.'

His dark eyes watch my face carefully before he finally nods. 'Good.' His voice was off.

His expression blanks. His body tenses. This Melvin - numb, removed, and quiet - was too familiar to me. It made me feel numb.

'You did not eat any dinner last night. How about breakfast?' He offers, sitting up beside me. 'There

are some pancakes already made downstairs.'

He does not mention that I missed dinner because of a panic attack. That I screamed so much my throat felt raw.

I shake my head, instantly regretting it. My few days of rescinding head pain were gone. 'I'm not hungry.'

Melvin does not seem to hear me as he helps me up. 'Let us go downstairs. Charlie will be coming soon.'

'And you'll be leaving?' I mumble, pushing my thick hair away from my face. I reach for a rubber band, then drop it knowing Naddalin Natalie will tie my hair up when we get downstairs. It will hurt my ribs too much to tie my hair back.

Melvin eyes me, his lips set in a thin line, but does not say a word. Instead, he helps me into my sweater that was lounging on the foot of the bed.

It has been getting easier to walk, even if I lack the energy to

move. Melvin always is prepared to carry me, though, insisting that his interference is faster and easier.

In less than a second, he is sitting me on the couch in the main sitting room. He sits next to me, throwing a blanket over both of us.

I always was cold.

I pull my legs as close to my chest as possible before it becomes too painful, laying my head against Melvin's shoulder. He is gentle as he wraps his hands in mine, but his

hesitance to touch me makes my stomach hurt.

'Here you are, dear.' Karly comes, bringing a small plate piled with pancakes and syrup. Melvin accepts the plate for me despite my earlier objections.

'You're getting too thin.' Karly tells me quietly, patting my head. She disappears upstairs without another word, leaving me and Melvin alone with the pancakes.

Melvin is quiet as he cuts the food for me, his face entirely blank.

'When will Charlie be here?' I mumble, taking the plate as Melvin hands it to me.

I stab a small piece of pancake with my fork, trying my hardest not to look too nauseated. There is no point in pretending - I cannot eat. My stomach is a mess of anxiety and pain. I drop the fork back onto the plate, wanting the whole thing to just disappear.

'In an hour or so.' Melvin responds. He is clicking the buttons on the remote faster than the TV can react, and I can see the small dents his fingertips are making in the thick plastic. 'You should hunt.' I mumble after a long moment of silence.

Melvin's black eyes flash to mine for just a second before they are back on the TV. The volume is too low for me to hear, and I doubt that Melvin was catching anything beyond fragments of words before he switched the channel again.

'I'm fine, Lily.' His voice is tight when he responds. I can feel his hand tightening on mine. I have always known Melvin to be controlled around me, but it seemed like he was losing it now.

'No, you're not.'

'I'm fine.' Melvin says again, his voice curt.

'I won't call Chiaz if that's what you're worried about.' I mutter under my breath, feeling frustrated by his behavior towards me.

Melvin hisses, the sound startling me so much I jump. Melvin does not respond to my shock, instead, his eyes stay trained on the TV. But the remote was cracked into three pieces in his hand.

'You're torturing yourself by not hunting.' I press. 'You haven't hunted since.' I trail off, my stomach churning as I realize the end of my sentence.

Before the attack. Several weeks before the attack.

'You haven't eaten since then either.' Melvin responds, the plastic remote cracks in his hand as the channel switches from tennis to an old black-and-white film.

'This isn't about me.'

He lets out a hard, cold laugh. 'Isn't it?'

'I'm serious, Melvin.'

'I am, too, Lily!' Melvin snaps at me, his face hard. 'I will not die if I starve, but you will. And you

will make all of us watch while you slowly wither away, won't you?'

Melvin's hand pulls from mine, and he has gone before I can even blink.

My hand drops heavily to the couch, and the painful feeling of rejection is a much deeper pit in my stomach now. His sudden disappearance is like a knife through my gut. I can already feel moisture forming in my eyes - misery, anger, and frustration. I wanted the old Melvin back - the one who never

hesitated to hold my hands, to kiss my neck, to brush his hand over my hair. He was gone now.

A small sound in the corner of my room made me jump and I looked over to see Melchor standing patiently in the doorway. That was the noise: he had put the book down on the table. My stomach twists as I spy the book, so I turn my eyes to Melchor instead.

'I'm sorry.' He offers gently, smiling. 'I didn't mean to scare you.' He walks towards me. 'There's

something about Thomas Hobbes that's thought-worthy, even as a vampire my age.'

'Who?' I mumble, accepting Melchor's attempt to ignore Melvin's abrupt departure. Melchor reaches for a white blanket that was folded on the table, he walks over to me, laying it across me. I cuddled into it, realizing just how cold I was even with the blanket Melvin had given me.

'He's an English philosopher from the seventeenth

century. He died less than two decades before I did.' It always shocked me a little just how old Melchor was, despite his eternally youthful face. This time was no different and Melchor smiled widely at my expression. 'I was reading one of his many books I have collected. His works were the first I learned about when I went back to study. I studied history and philosophy first; such was the culture at the time.'

'How many degrees do you have?' I mumble.

Melchor laughs, sitting down next to me. 'Too many, Lily. But never enough, it seems. The world changes very quickly, doesn't it?'

I did not answer. I had only been alive for eighteen years.

'Tell me why you won't eat.' Melchor says after a long moment of silence. He does not look at me, he stares straight ahead at the TV as he talks.

'I'm nauseous.' My voice was always so quiet. So meek. I

hated it, but I could never get my voice to cooperate. 'I have a migraine.'

Melchor nods gently. 'Nausea and migraines can be caused by hunger, Lily. You have not eaten a proper meal in over two weeks.'

'I can't.'

'Let's start small.' Melchor suggests patiently. He turns to me, his dark golden eyes watching me as he takes the plate of pancakes. 'Vegetable broth or apple sauce? Something to settle your stomach.'

I shake my head slowly. I did not want anything.

Melchor offers me a small smile. 'You must eat, Lily. Even if it is just a few bites at a time.' Melchor's tone is firm, though gentle. 'If there's something else, you'd like instead, let us know.'

I nod slowly, lowering my head against the armrest of the sofa. I am so tired.

Melchor does not say anything more, but he stays sitting beside me with his hand on top of

mine. It is comforting and soon I find myself dipping between consciousness and unconsciousness.

As I drift, I hear voices. Sometimes they shock me out of sleep only to go quite enough for me to settle again, and other times they talk so softly, so comfortingly that I lie and listen to the murmurs that I cannot make out into words. I feel gentle hands on me at times, too. Some adjust the weight of the blanket over my body, some press their lips to my forehead, and others

brush the hair from my face. I hear my name sometimes and those words always make me flinch, make me wish I could disappear from the room while they discuss who attacked me.

The house seemed much quieter than normal when I finally woke up. Melchor and I had been alone in the room for far longer than normal with no lingering voices of the others. I lower my head against the headrest, my exhausted body feeling the weight of my nightmares.

Last night's disturbed sleep was already catching up to me.

I am just slipping into sleep again when the doorbell rings. Melchor is off the couch in a second, walking slowly to the door to let my father inside. I snuggle deeper into my blankets, wishing with all my might that I could disappear into them.

I wish harder, squeezing my hands into fists, as heavy footsteps get closer.

'Hey kiddo.' Charlie says quietly. He sighs deeply when he sees me, his face full of worry. 'You look tired.'

'I'm fine.' I whisper, trying to sit up. The movement causes excruciating pain in my skull, and I immediately discard the idea of moving at all. On top of my exhaustion, the pain would not be subsiding today.

Charlie plops himself down onto the couch across from me,

shaking his head. 'You look terrible, Bells.'

I am not sure how to respond to Charlie. He is right - I do look terrible. I have not seen myself in the mirror in a long time. All the mirrors had been removed from the house after I first peered into one. I was thankful to whoever removed them.

'Are you sleeping at all?' he prods, his eyes narrowing at me. If anything, Charlie looked worse than me. He had lost weight and the bags

under his eyes alerted me that he was the one unable to sleep at night.

'I'm fine, Dad.' I whisper, a bit forcefully. I regret my words as I watch Charlie digest them. 'I'm sleeping, I promise.' I add, trying to make him feel a bit better.

'Good.'

'Are you eating?' I question quietly, tugging the blankets closer to my body. I was so cold. 'You lost weight.'

'Yeah.' He mumbles, leaning heavily against the sofa. 'Sue's been making me food. And Karly, too. Karly sends home so much food.' He cracks a small smile then, his eyes crinkling around the edges. 'Don't tell her, but I really prefer Sue's food.'

I grimace, trying to hold back a smile. Karly was perfectly capable of hearing him no matter where she was in this house.

'I am just not used to gourmet food, Bells. It is strange.'

'Karly does make fancy food.' I agree and Charlie laughs at my words. His loud laugh seems out of place in the quiet, empty house.

'Sue's fish is great. You know how I like fish.'

'I am sorry, Dad. I would make you something if I could.'

'Don't do that, kid.' Charlie mutters, his shoulders sagging. 'Don't try to take care of me right now.'

I cannot do anything but bite my lip in response. Charlie falls silent then, his eyes flickering from my face to the TV and then back again. A football game is playing, and it interests him because he eventually reaches to turn the volume a bit louder. He lapses into silence, leaning back in his seat as he watches.

The volume of the TV is making my headache a bit worse, and I wish Charlie would turn it off.

'Have you called Allison?' Charlie slips the words quietly and slowly as if he wishes I would not hear them.

'No. Do I need to call her again?' I turn to look at Charlie, narrowing my eyes to him. He looks a little regretful under my gaze.

Charlie grimaces, scratching his neck slightly. 'I know what you said about being a little more with Allison, but I do think you should talk to her.'

I close my eyes, sighing. Today would just be a miserable day for me.

'I am serious, Lily. I respected your decision to stay here and not to file a police report - even though I still think you should consider that, there's time to file still - but not telling Allison is something else entirely. I am all about respecting your choices now, I guess. But this one I must stand firm on.'

If Charlie did not need to know, I would not have told him

either. Allison would be inconsolable if she knew her daughter had been raped. She would fly to McAuley immediately, or, worse, fly me to Phoenix. I would never know peace again under the care of my mother.

'Dad, you saw how she reacted to my accident in Phoenix.' Talking made my head vibrate. 'She'll be livid if she knows about this.'

'I know, I know. But lying to her is not right.' Charlie insists, throwing his hands up in frustration. 'She's eventually going to find out.'

'No, she won't, Dad.' I work to make my voice firm. 'You're not going to tell her, are you?'

'No.'

'Well, neither am I. She will stay in the dark on this one.'

Charlie sighs, leaning back against the couch, admitting defeat. 'I am not with you on that, Lily. But call her, okay? She has been calling me asking for updates and I do not know what to tell her anymore.'

'I'll call her tonight.'

Charlie acknowledges my words with a nod before falling silent. It is not exceptionally long before Karly makes her way downstairs, offering Charlie some coffee and breakfast. He accepts Karly's offer and soon, I am sitting with a bowl of steaming broth in my hands that Karly promises will help me feel better and Charlie is inhaling a large stack of pancakes I had previously rejected.

Karly sits with us, making polite conversation with Charlie as

she sketches in one of her books. Charlie is still under the impression that Jae, Dejen, and Vivian are out of town attending college. According to Karly, all three of them are enjoying their time and are planning a trip home soon.

By lunchtime, Charlie and I are both exhausted from his uncharacteristically talkative visit, and he leaves with a promise to visit again tomorrow.

'What will you say to your mother?' Karly asks me lightly. She

has been humming over her sketch pad for over an hour now and the sound is quite comforting, not even slightly bothersome to my headache.

I struggle for a response because I am not sure what to say. Charlie, thankfully, got me off the hook the first time by telling Allison I had fallen. He had fielded most of her calls because she was too afraid to bother me - it would interfere with my recovery. But Charlie was right. She deserved more from me, and she deserved to hear my voice.

'I'm not sure.'

'Hmm.' Karly offers me a smile, putting her sketchbook down. 'You can offer to visit her when you are feeling better. Then she might not be so persistent about coming here to visit.'

'Maybe.' I take a sip of the tea that Karly had given me.

'There isn't much that can sway a mother's love, Lily.' Karly continues gently. 'Allison is just trying to take care of you in any way she can. We all are.'

I feel as if I have only closed my eyes for a moment as Karly's talking. When I open my eyes, the room is black except for a single lamp lit in the corner. Karly is not sitting on the chair across from me with her sketchbook anymore. I knew, then, that I had fallen asleep.

'Drink.' Melvin's voice is close to my ear, and I jump at the sudden order. He is sitting beside the couch, holding a small glass of water beside me. I obliged hesitantly, sucking cool water through the straw

until the raw taste in my mouth is gone and my throat is less dry. 'I apologize for leaving, Lily. I realize I hurt you in the way I acted, and my intentions were not to do that.'

'It's fine.' I mumble self-consciously, wishing I could hide from his intense gaze. His eyes were remorseful, matching his tone exactly. It was an interesting change from his emotion-less expression and blank tone earlier.

'No, it's not.' Melvin's jaw is stiff, and his voice is hard. 'I have no

right to disregard you like that. I will not do it again.'

I nodded slowly, accepting his apology. He did not know it, but he would do it again. Just then, Dejen strolls in, grinning widely.

'Did he apologize like a gentleman, Lily?' He asks heartily, his voice booming and making me wince slightly. I had only been around Dejen a few times in the past two weeks and in those instances, he was focused on other things. I had

forgotten how loud Dejen was, and how big he looked while standing.

I stared curiously at Dejen, then, wondering what he meant by his words. 'He did.' I respond confused.

Dejen grins wider. 'Good. Otherwise, Jae and I would have had to drag him outside and beat the pulp out of him. Again.'

'What?' I gasp, shock coursing through me. 'What did you and Jae do?'

Did they attack him? I knew Melvin was strong. I had seen the way he pulled Pierre off me in the ballet studio. He also had an advantage with his mind-reading abilities. But could he take on both Jae and Dejen? Dejen was so big compared to Melvin.

Dejen laughs loudly at my reaction, bending over in his fit and Melvin growls at him menacingly, his grip on my hand tightening slightly.

'Relax, Lily.' He breathes, plopping down onto the couch. 'We

did not rough him up too bad. I think Vivian might have, though. But he is back in one piece, isn't he?'

'Vivian?' I squeak, even more, shocked. Vivian defended me?

'Dejen, enough.' Melvin barks stiffly. His face had gone from remorseful to hard, and suddenly I wished Dejen had not said anything either. My Melvin, the one who did not always mask his emotions, had retreated. I am not surprised by the sure movements of Melvin as his hand pulls away from mine, but that

does not stop the pain through shots through my body as he does so. I missed my Melvin.

Dejen laughs again at Melvin's reaction, shaking his head as he reaches for the remote - a new one had replaced the cracked one - and flips the TV. The channel that pops up is a news channel and I roll gently to my side so I can see the TV more easily. There is no point in staring at Melvin's blank face when I can feel less pain staring at the TV.

'Investigators are considering gang activity, at this point.' The news anchor was saying, her hands fluttering nervously around her. 'With two more bodies found this afternoon.'

'Damn nomads.' Dejen grumbles, glaring at the TV. 'Need to clean up their own damn messes.'

'Dejen.' Melvin snarls. I jump uneasily at his tone, and Melvin turns to me quickly, apologetically.

'What?' I whispered to Melvin, trying to relax the sudden

sprint my heart had decided to go on. It was trying to jump out of my chest, through my throat.

'Melvin doesn't want you to know, it'll worry you.' Dejen rolls his eyes at Melvin, throwing his arm over the couch. 'Nomadic vampires have decided to hit Altoona as a massacre site. Newborns vamps. So far, a bunch of people have gone missing.'

'Charlie told me about that.' I mumble, biting my lip. 'I did not

realize it was vampires. That is so close.'

As I speak, I feel the familiar ache in my head worsening.

'You're safe, Lily.' Melvin tells me firmly. 'Don't worry about it.'

He had told me that before. He told me that before Pierre attacked me. He told me that before he left me in the forest. He told me that when we got back from Italy. But, despite all my protections, we were still in this situation.

'When did they start?' I asked Dejen, knowing that nomads did not stay in a particular area for exceptionally long.

Red static covers my vision in pulses. Pulses perfectly coincide with the pounding at the back of my head.

'Three weeks ago.' Dejen answers coolly, switching the channels as a police officer comes into view to explain more about the murders. 'They should leave soon.'

'We'll take of it, Lily.' Melvin promises confidently.

'Pathetic.' Dejen shakes his head, gesturing wildly toward the game on the TV. 'Lily, this has to be the dumbest game I've ever seen.'

It was strange that Dejen was being so easy-going right now, watching TV like he normally would have done before the attack. Everyone else seemed so wound up - when they were home, which was rare.

Today Melchor and Karly did nothing but encourage me to eat or drink water, or they wanted me to get up and walk around or sleep. Naddalin Natalie had been hiding upstairs for hours before quietly placing herself at my feet to stare at nothing for several more hours. Jae followed her - hugging the walls as he moved around the house. He always stayed close to control the atmosphere, and I welcomed the calming waves Jae let wash over the room.

And Melvin was Melvin, but the emotion-concealed Melvin. He was the one who rarely touched me and talked in a bleak voice that made me feel numb.

It was strange that the lives of the Shezor family seemed entirely revolved around me now.

Dejen was the most easy-going of all his family members. I imagined he might be just as serious as the rest of them when the time called for it, considering that is how he was when Pierre decided to make

me his next target. But now, here he was, screaming at the TV and trying to explain the stupidity of football moves as if the world was not tense and suffocating around us.

'I can coach a team better than that any day, Lily.' He was yelling, threatening to change the channel to something worth his time. No one reacted to his boisterous noise or ridiculous behavior during such a stressful time. It seemed like no one cared, or no one even realized it was happening.

'I don't understand football, Dejen.' was the only response I could give him after his numerous comments pointed directly at me.

'Well, obviously! No one can understand football when it is being played like this.' Dejen rolls his eyes theatrically, tossing the remote onto the table. The rigid plastic cracks heartily against the oak. He turns his whole body away from the game, right toward me. 'Bells,'

I flinch at the use of my nickname. No one had called me that

recently, though I was unsure of why it bothered me. I did not want the memories to infiltrate my brain, but a significant part of me wondered if he had ever used it and bridged an unconscious negative association with the name.

Dejen hesitates for a split second and then continues talking. 'The quarterback is the most important player on the field, and they just pushed him out of the game!'

I picked up a small piece of the croissant that Naddalin Natalie had given to me hours ago. My hand is shaking, and I can see Dejen watching how the croissant trembles. I suddenly feel exceptionally self-conscious and drop the croissant back onto the plate.

I would not be able to eat it anyway. I was not hungry, even if my nausea was subsiding slowly over time.

'That doesn't make a lot of sense.'

'Exactly!' Dejen groans, shaking his head again. 'When you're a vampire, I'll teach you how to play real football, Lily.'

I do not miss the way Melvin hisses at Dejen and the way Dejen rolls his eyes in response. Melvin was still not on board with my transformation. Even an attack like this would not change his stubborn mind. Dejen turns his back to Melvin, clearly ignoring his brother's irritation and focusing on me.

'I am serious, Lily. This is the worst game I have ever seen - and I have seen a lot.' Dejen grins and I cannot help but smile at his enthusiasm. I have missed Dejen and his ridiculously fun behavior. His booming voice rarely shook the house the way it did now.

'You should play, Dejen.' I grin. 'Major leagues.'

Dejen snorts. 'That's Kickball, Bells.' I do not flinch when he uses my nickname this time, and it pleases him. 'You mean the NFL.'

'Oh.' I can feel my face go hot, and Dejen grins.

'Playing myself doesn't seem fair to humans.' Dejen chuckles. 'With their slow brains and frail bodies.'

'That's rude.'

'It is true. I also would not be able to rise too high up in the ranks, otherwise someone might notice.' He flashes his teeth, obviously insinuating his vampire nature. 'Where's the fun in staying mediocre?'

'Don't forget the blood from injuries.'

'Precisely.' Dejen grabs the remote, switching the channel to something new. 'You like hockey, Lily?'

'Never watched it.'

Dejen makes a face at me, clearly horrified. 'Watch this, you uninformed kid.'

I turn my eyes to the TV, watching large-bodied men skating around with sticks. I understood the

basics of hockey: get the puck into the other team's goal. But that was it. My mind seemed too blank to work out the intricacies of the sport and the motions that made Dejen shake his head in disgust.

'Chiaz Naztherth is coming.' Melvin groans after a moment of silence. I pulled my eyes away from the TV, swallowing thickly as I watched Melvin's face morph into complete annoyance.

Melvin mutters something under his breath, standing up suddenly.

I follow suit, sitting up slowly. Confusion and excitement poured through me, and then gratitude that my movement did not make my body hurt the way it normally would. My body was finally healing, it seemed.

Chiaz had come several days ago but I had not heard from him since, other than Charlie,

bringing some pasta Jake had made for me.

Somehow, Melvin looks even more irritated than before as he stalks toward the front door.

'What does the dog want now?' Dejen mumbles, standing up.

'Be nice, Dejen.' I say, pulling myself up to stand. It was difficult - trying to force my whole weight off the couch when my ribs still ached. I had only one hand to push myself up with, which was disastrous. Dejen shakes his head at

me, making a quiet comment about fragile human bodies, pulling me up.

'Here.' Dejen grabs the throw blanket I had been previously buried under, wrapping it around my shoulders. 'Don't freeze outside.'

'It's April, Dejen.' I snap at him, but I wrap my arms around the blanket anyway because I know I will need it and because it is still warm from my body heat. If anything, the blanket helps hide the way my body trembles weakly as I stand.

'Would you stay inside if I asked you to?' Melvin asks me, his voice tight and his expression upset.

'I'm not staying inside.'

Melvin groans, shaking his head at me. 'Of course not.' His face is hard as he walks to the door and I, much slower, stumble after him.

'You could have called.' Melvin's voice is like steel razors.

I am about to berate Melvin for his tone when Chiaz responds in a voice that makes me recoil.

'I don't have any leeches on my speed dial.' Chiaz crosses his arms over his bare muscled chest.

My heart pounds in my chest. Was he not here to spend time with me? Had he come to fight with Melvin?

'What's going on?' I asked Melvin, looking between Chiaz's angered stance and Melvin's. Neither one of them looks at me. I cannot help the sudden interruption of panic that grips my heart, squeezing it painfully.

'Can we discuss this later?' Melvin questions impatiently. Chiaz snorts and Melvin takes a deep, calming breath. 'I already know what you came to say. Message delivered. Consider us warned.'

'Warned?' I whisper, looking at Melvin. Melvin glances down at me for a second with worried eyes, and I think he must have heard the panicked pace of my heart in my chest. 'What are you talking about?'

Chiaz's glare is full of loathing, and Melvin's expression is just as cruel.

Dizziness shakes my frame. I reached for something - anything - to hold me steady but nothing was close enough. Melvin's hand latches onto my arm, holding me upright.

'You didn't tell her?' Chiaz's voice is loud, incredulous. 'What, were you afraid she would take our side? Manipulative.' I miss the rest of the words he says. My rushing of blood is loud in my ears.

'Please drop it, Chiaz.' Melvin's voice is much more level, much more controlled than Chiaz's is. Melvin is good at that.

'Why?'

'Melvin, what don't I know?' I sounded like I was gasping. Melvin does not respond to me. He glares at Chiaz.

'Jake?' I turn to Chiaz, desperate for answers.

Chiaz raises an eyebrow at me, smug. 'He did not tell you that

his. brother crossed the line last night?' he asks, his tone thick with sarcasm and. pride. Chiaz turns his eyes from me to Melvin.

'Let's not forget what you did.' Melvin hisses.

'What?' My stomach churns. Why, why, why? Why couldn't they just get along?

'Paul was totally justified in -'

'It was no man's land!' Melvin growls at him. His grip

tightens on my arm, and I can feel his control slipping again. 'Dejen never crossed the border.'

'Was not!'

'Dejen and Paul?' I whisper. The panic is coursing through me much faster now and I know my heart is not going to relax. Paul was the most volatile of the pack, he was the one who always lost control. 'What happened? Were they fighting? Did Paul get hurt?'

Dejen was just inside with me, joking around. Why hadn't he mentioned any of this to me?

'No one fought.' Melvin says quietly, brushing his hand over my cheek. He turns to Chiaz, seething. 'If you honestly believed the treaty was broken, you would have come with back-up. Go back to your pack of pups while you are ahead.'

'Melvin,'

He looks at me again, his expression softening. 'No one got hurt. Do not panic, please, Lily.'

'You didn't tell her anything, did you?' Chiaz demands angrily. 'Why haven't you told her?'

'Melvin.' His name slips from my lips even though I do not want it to. I sound pathetic. Needy and weak and I hate myself for it.

Melvin presses his hand a bit harder against my skin, reminding me that he is right next to me.

'Leave now.' Melvin's voice is menacing. I am sure I would have fallen if it were not for Melvin's grip on my arm. 'Lily, breathe, love.' He is holding me around my waist, his cold hand cupping my face. 'You're safe here. Nothing happened.'

I cannot seem to keep myself still and I sway uneasily in his arms. I cannot hear anything over the sound of my lungs dragging air through my lips, but it seemed as if there was no air left in the world for me to breathe in at all.

'You don't think Lily has a right to know?' Chiaz snaps, challenging Melvin. 'It's her life.'

Melvin growls at him and the sound brings me closer to the brink of an attack. I could not tell if the shaking beneath me was from my legs or Melvin. I have never seen Melvin shake - that was usually a wolf trait.

'Why should she panic when she wasn't in any danger, mongrel?'

'Better frightened than lied to.'

'Do you really think frightening her is better than protecting her?' Melvin is barely speaking to Chiaz now. His eyes are only on me as he continues to stroke my cheek, encouraging me to calm down.

'She's tougher than you think, and she's been through worse.'

Abruptly, Melvin's fake calm expression contorts into one of pain. I could not help the way my memories flashed to Jane's ghastly gift being used on Melvin in Volterra

and the way his body cringed in agony against the marble tiles.

'Melvin?' I whispered, shocked. He grimaces, hiding a wince, looking back at me.

'It's nothing, Lily.' He murmurs, pressing his lips to my forehead. I shudder under his touch, remembering that his lips were not the only ones to touch my skin. 'Chiaz just has a good memory, that's all.'

'Chiaz, that's enough.' I snapped at him, braver than I could

imagine. Chiaz shrugs, though his grin never falters.

'The treaty stands until your leeches break it.'

'We wouldn't dare, Chiaz.' Melchor's smooth voice is so close that I jump. I was not sure when he had come.

'Sam said to keep off our land.' Chiaz says finally, his voice hard.

'Keep off ours.' Melvin retorts, just as harsh. Chiaz turns,

without another word or glance, and disappears into the forest.

'Lily,' Melvin turns towards me now, his expression concerned.

'What did you keep from me?' I demanded, wanting my voice to be strong, but it was pathetically weak.

'Don't worry about it, Lily, please.' Melvin begs, brushing my cheeks. I did not realize I had started crying.

'Tell her, Melvin.' Vivian's voice is sharp behind me, and I turn, shocked by her sudden presence. Vivian was always gone, which was entirely normal for her. She did not like me before the attack and there was no reason for her to like me now.

I twisted my head around, trying to see who else had come that I did not know of. It was just Vivian and Melchor.

'She's not well.' Melvin responds.

Vivian offers me a look that I am not sure how to process - not anger or hatred, but nothing remotely warm either. 'She deserves to know.'

Melvin sighs, pressing the bridge of his nose. 'She's on the verge of having a panic attack, Vivian, now is not the best time.'

'We tracked a scent, Lily.' Vivian says, defiantly. Her voice is cool and level. 'It's not the one from your room, but it was one none of us recognized and it was near your

house.' I shudder beneath Melvin's hands as Vivian mentions my home. 'We chased the scent and found the vampire, but they were playing with the boundary line like they were reading it from a map. The mutts thought Dejen crossed the line and they reacted defensively, and so we did, too.'

Her voice is calm, even. I listen to her every word, hanging onto it to keep my panic at bay.

'That's all that happened.' She tells me with a small nod. 'No

fights, no one got hurt. The mutts have been overly sensitive for no reason, but I am sure it will fade with time.'

I feel relieved, feeling the Earth steady around me.

'See, Lily, nothing to worry about.' Vivian offers me a small smile, and I am so relieved that I return it.

Nothing happened. There was no fight with the wolves. No one was hurt. Not Dejen, not Paul, not the vampire they were after. I could

feel the blood draining out of my face and the edges of my vision slowly going dark.

'You're tracking him?'

I cannot wait for Melvin to come to me. I cannot wait for your coven leader to find me. His words play like a broken record. His voice scratched and repeated. Replaying words, I have already heard a thousand times in my dreams, in my memories, in my panic when Melvin touches me the wrong way.

I am thankful, then, for Melvin holding me up because I cannot feel my legs.

I am so excited to meet your coven, Lily. I need them to come after me.

I am aware of the soft touches of someone's fingers in my hair before anything else. Then, quiet murmuring around me before the voices become clearer. Melvin's upset and panicked tone against Melchor's soft and calm one. Naddalin Natalie reassures everyone

with words I cannot make out, and Dejen swears he will give him what he deserves.

'You can't!' My voice seems muffled by something, but my eyes flash open and I am staring into the eyes of Melvin.